

**This Side of the Ploughshares:**  
**Concepts of Covenant and Repentance in Paul Ramsey's Political Theology**

Adam Edward Hollowell

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of:

Doctor of Philosophy

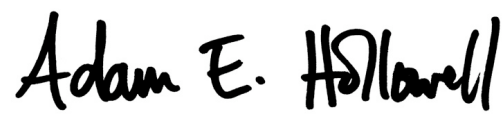
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## DECLARATION

23 September 2009

I, Adam Edward Hollowell, hereby declare that I have written this thesis and that the work done here is entirely my own.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Adam E. Hollowell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath it.

Adam Edward Hollowell

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## Acknowledgments

A promising young graduate student once wrote to Paul Ramsey the following assessment of doctoral research: 'I think that D. Phil theses are more than anything else an obstacle course in disciplined self-management. By the end of the course I was beginning to think I could not manage myself much longer'. Without any pretense of self-management, what sits now in the reader's hands is the result of my run through the obstacle course of doctoral work. It is surely a course I could not have made it through alone.

It would be difficult to overstate my debts to Oliver O'Donovan for his gracious and patient instruction from beginning to end of this project. He treated my work with a degree of care and seriousness that it hardly deserved. Michael Northcott has been a mentor and friend throughout my years in Edinburgh, even before this project began. I am grateful for his faith in my abilities and enthusiastic support of my research.

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## **Introduction**

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skilful; but time and chance happen to them all.

Ecclesiastes 9:11

When it comes to moral political endeavors, the good eventually achieved is never identical to the good initially pursued. This is true if for no other reason than the fact that time passes with every new political moment. We *move* from goods intended to goods achieved. At the same time such movement is not simply a product of the temporal character of our lives. Occupying a middle ground between accounts of human agency as wholly determined or wholly ambiguous there is a sense in which any exercise of the will is fundamentally indeterminate. Said more simply, we are contingent beings. Thus, while it may be possible to speak conceptually of a determinate or atemporal political good, the possibility of a moral political endeavor – that is, a purposive movement toward some political good – rests upon the inescapably contingent and temporal character of our lives.

If political endeavors are never entirely under (or out of) our control and always take shape temporally then it is important to insist that the discrepancy between intended goods and actual goods need not be interpreted negatively. That is to say, the indeterminate character of our moral lives need not be seen as a tragic disruption to what would otherwise be seamless political existence. Rather, the indeterminacy is a deliberate (read: good) feature of created existence in time. This

allows for recognition of a structure to political morality. Agents seize the opportunity afforded by contingency to pursue identified political goods with purpose and direction. At the same time moral pursuits are always highly conditioned by contingencies of delimited authority, responsibilities of representation, demands of process, etc. The constantly changing political landscape perpetually requires both reactive and anticipatory adjustments of the political good in sight.

If contingency and temporality shape and limit any political pursuit of the good, then a chief task of political theology is to illuminate the theological significance of those features of created existence. Political theology bears the burden of articulating the divine origin and purpose of the structures which make political morality possible. In this way contingency comes into view not as an incidental feature of humanity but as the gift of a good creator making possible faithful creaturely response. Similarly, political goods take shape not merely in time but in a particular time between creation and eschaton.

This thesis is a study in the theological significance of indeterminacy and temporality in the pursuit of political goods by way of an analysis of the political writings of 20<sup>th</sup> century moral theologian Paul Ramsey. His reflections on the unique moral structure of political actions provide the theological and analytical resources to animate such a study. Close attention to his work pursues an understanding of how theological language describes, interprets and accounts for the nature of political morality and the function that such descriptions have in defining and shaping concepts of the political good.

One of the two most significant obstacles to probing Ramsey's writings for a theological analysis of the nature of political morality is that he frequently failed in his published work to articulate explicitly the theological assumptions underlying his ethics. He was well aware of his own tendency to attend to particular moral issues rather than wider doctrinal matters, at one point calling himself 'an author who has been diverted from this task of urgent and central theoretical and theological importance for ethics by a need felt to write on *special problems* in Christian ethics'.<sup>1</sup> To address this obstacle this study will supplement his published works with reference to personal correspondence and unpublished papers in the Paul Ramsey Papers at Duke University's Perkins-Bostock Library.<sup>2</sup> His theological presuppositions are quite frequently more thinly veiled in unpublished materials and personal letters and they offer unique insight into his development as a moral theologian.

The second obstacle is that Ramsey is more frequently treated by interlocutors and interpreters as a theologically informed political casuist than as a constructive political theologian. While this point may appear more semantic than interpretive, my preference for attending to his distinctive theological contributions will be apparent in the fact that over the course of this study I dedicate minimal space to the most prominent and immediately recognizable features of his political ethics such as issues of nuclear deterrence, noncombatant immunity, etc. This is not only because much has already been written on these issues, but also because I am

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 2. As Oliver O'Donovan observes, Ramsey 'saw the Christian moralist more as a travelling apostle than as a resident bishop'. See 'Obituary: Paul Ramsey (1913-1988)', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 1, no. 1 (1988): 86.

<sup>2</sup> The Paul Ramsey Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Perkins-Bostock Library, Duke University. I will hereafter and throughout this study refer to this collection as 'Ramsey Papers'.

attempting to capture Ramsey less as a casuist and more as a theologian reflecting on the shape and definition of the political good more widely considered. I will say more about the consequences of reading him principally as a political theologian later. For now I want to turn more squarely to the substance of the discussion in the forthcoming pages.

### **Theological Concepts of Covenant and Repentance: A Chapter Summary**

I have proposed that Paul Ramsey's work offers unique insight into contingency and temporality as theologically significant features of political morality. The subsequent task is to address the question of why covenant and repentance come into such sharp focus as the most appropriate points of entry into his political theology. Even scholars familiar with his political writings are unlikely to remember him having said anything about repentance. It suffers from marginalization and underdevelopment in his writings, not to mention misinterpretation in secondary literature.<sup>3</sup> His most significant usage of the concept comes by way of his suggestion that politics is a realm of 'deferred repentance'.<sup>4</sup> However, criticism of the term both in print and in personal correspondence drives him initially into an awkward defensive position before the phrase disappears altogether from his later work. Additionally, his essay 'Political Repentance Now' is

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<sup>3</sup> Very little is written on the function of repentance in Ramsey's political theology in secondary literature. The lone exception is David Little, 'The Structure of Justification in the Political Ethics of Paul Ramsey', in *Love and Society*, ed. James T. Johnson and David H. Smith (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 139-162.

<sup>4</sup> The term appears in *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* (New York: Association Press, 1961) and is developed more substantially in *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961).

a wry and biting criticism of liberal perspectives on politics but offers no substantive theological insight into his understanding of the titular phrase.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, covenant is as ubiquitous in Ramsey's political ethics as repentance is absent. In an interview late in his career he calls covenant the *Leitmotif* of his work.<sup>6</sup> This may make it the more obvious choice for theological examination, but the concept functions more comfortably in his medical and sexual ethics than in his political ethics; it is underdeveloped in his most explicit writings on war and politics. Ramsey consistently emphasized the centrality of covenant for his thinking while at the same time leaving inarticulate its role in the determination of central political concepts such as the *esse* and the *bene esse* of politics. This leads commentator William Werpehowski to observe that 'the virtual absence of talk of creation, covenant, and fellow humanity in Ramsey's political ethics is especially striking'.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these limitations – indeed, perhaps because of them – I believe that covenant and repentance are ripe for investigation. I also believe that both concepts offer uniquely illuminating glimpses into Ramsey's contributions to political theology. Let me elaborate, then, on the selection of repentance, followed by covenant, as central elements of this study by succinctly summarizing the chapters that follow.

Section I identifies repentance as a theological window into his understanding of the indeterminate and temporal nature of political morality. I lay

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Ramsey, 'Political Repentance Now', *Christianity in Crisis* 28, no. 18 (October 1968): 247-252.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth L. Vaux, Sara Vaux, and Mark Stenberg, eds., *Covenants of Life: Contemporary Medical Ethics in Light of the Thought of Paul Ramsey*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 256.

<sup>7</sup> William Werpehowski, *American Protestant Ethics and the Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 51. Part of what I argue in the second section of this study is that *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, which uses the concept of covenant heavily, should be properly considered part of Ramsey's "political ethics".

the foundation for this claim in chapter one by examining his use of ‘deferred repentance’ to characterize the unique limitations on the actions and responsibilities of those in political office in *War and the Christian Conscience* and *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*.<sup>8</sup> I also consider extensive criticisms from David Little and Ramsey’s later attempt to clarify his meaning of the term. Through these discussions it becomes clear that although “deferred repentance” is a troubled and misleading concept, it remains essentially a call for purposive political action in accordance with just war principles.

Chapter two begins to develop a more sympathetic reading of his attraction to repentance as a political concept by tracing his theological debts to H. Richard Niebuhr’s ‘war articles’.<sup>9</sup> These often-overlooked political writings from the 1930s and 40s develop an alternative set of images and concepts to reorient Christian discourse on war such as judgment, crucifixion and the kingdom of God. The most prevalent of these is his insistence on repentance as the determinative motif for a Christian response to war. I argue that Ramsey inherits this impulse while simultaneously trying to drive Christian reflection on war from contrition to political action. It is this drive which produces the most misleading aspects of his account of “deferred repentance”.

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<sup>8</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 13. A few words are in order about the style and language of Ramsey’s writing. Although the use of gender-neutral language is standard for contemporary writing, his ubiquitous use of terms such as statesman, statesmanship, etc. make it impossible to alter his concepts and quotations in a manner conforming to this standard I make the effort wherever possible to replace terms such as “statesmen” with more neutral (but equally Ramseyian) language such as “magistrates”, but I ask the reader’s pardon where gender-exclusive references are unavoidable.

<sup>9</sup> Richard B. Miller limits the selection of Niebuhr’s “war articles” to those published in *The Christian Century*. I am willing to expand the use of the term to include selected articles published elsewhere on similar themes from the same period. See *Interpretations of Conflict: Ethics, Pacifism, and the Just-War Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 126.



Chapter three proceeds from Ramsey's unique account of politics as deferred repentance to a series of observations on a theology of repentance and call for constructive political action. To do this I consult his discussion of guilt and repentance in *Nine Modern Moralists*, as well as a number of letters from his professional correspondence over the issue of the Vietnam War. Most significantly, however, I explain his early distinction between repentance for unrighteousness and repentance for righteousness in 'The Manger, the Cross and the Resurrection'.<sup>10</sup> This affords a unique perspective on the role of repentance in his theological perspective on politics. I also suggest on the basis of these miscellaneous writings that his vision for political repentance can be captured by the phrase: 'the least unavoidable evil is simply the greatest possible good; no tears please'.<sup>11</sup>

While repentance plays a relatively minor role in Ramsey's more systematic political arguments, in the first section of this study I assign to it a significant interpretive function in understanding his foundational theological commitments for political ethics. My analysis makes clear that he considers constructive action to be the principal Christian response to indeterminate political structures. It also reveals that he employs a theology of repentance to call attention to the varying levels of contingency and temporality plaguing any political endeavor.

Section II turns to the concept of covenant. Chapter four examines his use of Jean Jacques Rousseau's social contract as a heuristic device for understanding distinctive features of Israel's covenant in *Basic Christian Ethics*.<sup>12</sup> The covenant/contract analogy allows him to highlight Yahweh's transcendent will as the

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Ramsey, 'The Manger, the Cross, and the Resurrection' *Christianity in Crisis* 3, no. 4 (1943): 4. As I will show, he replicates the distinction in 'Natural Law and the Nature of Man', *Christendom* 9, no. 3 (1944): 369-381.

<sup>11</sup> Vaux, et. al., eds., *Covenants of Life*, 165.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950).

source of moral obligation, as well as Israel's responsibility for faithful obedience to the covenant relationship. I argue, however, that the analogy distracts Ramsey from exploring his suggestion that the work of Hugo Grotius offers a 'closer parallel' to Israel's covenant than the social contract.<sup>13</sup> It also keeps him from developing a doctrine of creation robust enough to sustain his transition from Israel's moral obligations to a political ethic built on a theology of covenant.

Chapter five links covenant and creation to Ramsey's understanding of the structure of political morality. In *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* he reconstructs his political theology of covenant on the foundation of Karl Barth's formula, 'creation is the external basis of covenant' and 'covenant is the internal basis of creation'.<sup>14</sup> I argue that his principal formula for interpreting political ethics— the *esse* and the *bene esse* of politics – reinterprets Barth's doctrine of creation while pushing away from his special ethics of war and political justice. Of crucial importance for establishing the distinctiveness of his theological perspective is Oliver O'Donovan's reading of the role of power in both Ramsey and Barth. I use his analysis to bring into focus Ramsey's embrace of the 'ambiguity of all political right' and theological commentary on the structure of political judgment.<sup>15</sup>

Chapter six suggests that an emphasis on decision-making in his anti-situationist moral theory derives from an allegiance to the moral bonds of covenant theology. This produces a political account of "choice" that is properly informed and governed by the just war criteria without being subsumed into them. Ramsey also

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 381.

<sup>14</sup> See Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, vol. III, 1 of *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance and trans. J.W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 94, 228.

<sup>15</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, 'Karl Barth and Ramsey's "Uses of Power"', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 19, no. 2 (1991): 5. This essay is reprinted as Oliver O'Donovan, 'Karl Barth and Paul Ramsey's "Uses of Power"', in *Bonds of Imperfection*, ed. Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 246-275.

uses temporal and interpersonal bonds to explain the limitations placed upon Christians engaged in political ethics – the church as ‘theoretician’.<sup>16</sup> Both his appreciation for prudential judgments and his commitment to structures of political authority reveal the distinct sensitivity to contingency and temporality inherent in his political theology of covenant.

Section III brings together the discussions of covenant and repentance. This begins in chapter seven with the recognition of three shifts in his perspective on political theology: from eschatology to Christology as the foundational theological doctrine for political ethics; from repentance to responsibility as the critical political concept to be appropriated from H. Richard Niebuhr’s ethics; and from Karl Barth to Helmut Thielicke as the source of covenantal theology for the political realm.

These shifts drive an examination in chapter eight of two focal points in Ramsey’s later writings which exhibit the convergence of covenant and repentance. The first of these is his turn to the covenant of Noah and the Tower of Babel as significant narratives for political realism. The second is the introduction of two new terms: the concept of ‘moral anguish’ and an emphasis on moral evils to be considered ‘no moment more’.<sup>17</sup> I draw together the essential features of his theology of covenant and repentance to illuminate his unique contributions to a theological interpretation of political morality. I display these contributions using his often-

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Who Speaks for the Church? A Critique of the 1966 Geneva Conference on Church and Society* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1967), 152; *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968; reprint, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1983), 190.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 52, 72.

repeated interpretation of Luke 14 and the distinction between ‘taking counsel’ and ‘counting the costs’, as well as the phrase ‘politics is a kind of doing’.<sup>18</sup>

### **Paul Ramsey as Political Theologian**

Having set down the basic features of the forthcoming chapters, I want to preface them by considering the location of this study on the map of existing scholarship on Ramsey. These are still the early days of such scholarship— after all, we only recently passed the twentieth anniversary of his death. Yet, it was once suggested to me that not every book on Saint Augustine must begin, “Augustine was born to modest parents in North Africa”, and while the literature on Ramsey is merely a fraction of that on Augustine, I believe studies of his work have moved beyond the point of needing to begin, “Paul Ramsey was born the son of a Methodist minister in Mississippi in 1913”.<sup>19</sup> Among the benefits of examining his work at this stage in the development of secondary literature is a release from the burden of adhering to analysis of the elementary details of his life or most immediately accessible concepts in his theological ethics.

To say it another way, there is freedom in knowing that several introductory volumes on Ramsey have already been written. David Attwood’s *Paul Ramsey’s Political Ethics* provides a foundational account of his basic perspectives on political issues of resistance, deterrence and justified war.<sup>20</sup> D.S. Long’s *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism: The Ethics of Paul Ramsey* assesses the early years of his life and

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<sup>18</sup> The most accessible version of the interpretation is ‘Counting the Costs’ in *The Just War*, 523-536.

<sup>19</sup> For an excellent introductory biography see William Werpehowski and Stephen D. Crocco. Introduction to *The Essential Paul Ramsey: A Collection*, edited by William Werpehowski and Stephen D. Crocco (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), vii-xxv.

<sup>20</sup> David Attwood, *Paul Ramsey’s Political Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 1992).

work chronologically, including a detailed account of Ramsey's pacifist writings from the 1930s.<sup>21</sup> Michael C. McKenzie presents his use of agape as a resource for ethics in a postmodern cultural context.<sup>22</sup>

Added to these are two Festschriften which include critical commentary on developments in his political ethics. The first, *Love and Society: Essays in the Ethics of Paul Ramsey*, was published during his lifetime and elicited a lengthy response from Ramsey in 1976.<sup>23</sup> The second, a collection of essays in the *Journal of Religious Ethics* in 1991, commemorates his contributions to the field of theological ethics.<sup>24</sup> This still-growing collection of secondary literature means that the reader hoping to understand Ramsey's most explicitly fundamental terms and concepts in political ethics – e.g., the centrality of principles of proportion and discrimination for *jus in bello*, critical modern thought on the morality of nuclear deterrence and war, etc. – will find no shortage of resources.

One trend among this proliferation of secondary literature is the tendency to interpret him predominantly as a casuist thinker (and therein overlook his distinctive theological contributions). My treatment of him as a political theologian is an attempt to offer a fresh perspective on his work which will both complement and, to some extent, correct those readings. While no single interpretation is the foil of this project, it is nonetheless helpful to begin this new study by suggesting that Ramsey's interpreters tend to obscure his contributions to political theology by making one of two basic assumptions.

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<sup>21</sup> D. Stephen Long, *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism: The Ethics of Paul Ramsey* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Michael C. McKenzie, *Paul Ramsey's Ethics: The Power of 'Agape' in a Postmodern World* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> James T. Johnson and David H. Smith, eds., *Love and Society: Essays in the Ethics of Paul Ramsey* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974); Paul Ramsey, 'Some Rejoinders', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 4, no. 2 (1976): 185-237.

<sup>24</sup> James T. Johnson and Jeffrey Stout, eds., special issue, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 19, no. 2 (1991).

The first is the assumption that his thought is best appreciated when organized and interpreted according to the particular ethical questions or issues that occupied his mind. Charles Curran's *Politics, Medicine, and Christian Ethics: A Dialogue with Paul Ramsey* is one example of this approach. He sets out to 'consider questions of political and medical ethics in dialogue with the writings of Paul Ramsey'.<sup>25</sup> Other examples include *Love and Society* and the Festschrift dedicated to his medical ethics: *Covenants of Life: Contemporary Medical Ethics in Light of the Thought of Paul Ramsey*.<sup>26</sup>

Two studies which follow this line of thinking, though less directly, are the aforementioned volumes by Attwood and McKenzie. Both writers do an admirable job taking seriously the theological foundations of his work, but they tend to examine his relationship with influential thinkers rather than his distinctive theological contributions. This is most evident in the fact that both studies present their commentary on his theological foundations in order to inform subsequent chapters on the finer points of his medical and political ethics. While it is certainly helpful to examine Ramsey's theological influences as a way of providing context and content for the interpretation of his casuist ethics, I want here to consider more explicitly what he can offer to political theology as such.

The second interpretive assumption shaping studies of his work is one which subjects his value as a theological thinker to devastating critique on the assumption that he either neglects specific theological perspectives or presents a shallow theology more heavily determined by non-theological resources. This perspective is most apparent in early doctoral studies on Ramsey's ethics by a number of young

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<sup>25</sup> Charles E. Curran, *Politics, Medicine, and Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1973), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Johnson and Smith, eds., *Love and Society*; Vaux, et. al., eds., *Covenants of Life*.

Catholic scholars whose primary critique of him is, in one way or another, simply that he is not Catholic.<sup>27</sup> Ramsey was aware of several of these attempts and commented on it late in his career to an inquiring Ph.D. student writing her dissertation on his work. He wrote, ‘you may like to know that some dissertations on me done in Rome have seemed to me to be, by comparison, uninteresting, even pedantic (which, at least, I am not)’.<sup>28</sup>

Another instance of this second assumption can be found in D.S. Long’s *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism*. Long argues that his theological development is restricted by an early allegiance to philosophical idealism and an inherited (Reinhold) Niebuhrian realism which is ‘not indebted to Christian notions of sin, but to pagan notions of tragedy’.<sup>29</sup> His presentation of Ramsey’s ethics as shallow and ultimately non-theological obscures the recognition of potential contributions to a theological interpretation of politics.<sup>30</sup>

The present study tries to avoid falling into either of these two interpretive categories, first, by taking seriously both Ramsey’s theological influences and his theological contributions. This is evident in the first section outlining his adoption

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<sup>27</sup> For two examples, see John Carville, ‘Love Transforming Justice in the Christian Ethics of Paul Ramsey’, S.T.D. diss., Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1974; Edwin F. O’Brien, ‘The Origin and Development of Moral Principles in the Writings of Paul Ramsey’, S.T.D. diss., Pontifical University of St. Thomas, 1976, Box 54, Ramsey Papers. Although I have not been able to obtain access to them, the following two theses may also be among this group: P.T. McCormick, ‘Paul Ramsey’s Covenantal Ethics: An Investigation into His Medical Writings’, S.T.D. diss., Gregorium, Rome, 1984; David Fulton, ‘Preservation of Human Life in the Medical Ethics of Paul Ramsey’, S.T.D. diss., Angelicum, Rome, 1988.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Ramsey to Deborah Streeter, July 7, 1978, Box 24, Ramsey Papers. He opens the letter warmly and jokingly, noting, ‘As you know, I am a man of principle. One of those principles is that no one should be allowed to write a thesis or dissertation on a still living theologian. Therefore in writing you I violate one of my deeply entrenched (*sic*) principles – unless perhaps I am already dead’.

<sup>29</sup> Long, *Tradition*, 40, n. 40. The investigation into the theological roots of his political realism which follows will help clarify the difference between Long’s suggested meaning of tragedy in Ramsey’s ethics and his use of the term. I will return to this point specifically in chapter eight.

<sup>30</sup> I take Kevin Carnahan’s dissertation to avoid many of Long’s pitfalls, though his tendency to undervalue Ramsey’s later development as a theological interpreter of politics may stem from the emphasis he places (like Long) on Ramsey’s doctoral research on philosophical idealism. See ‘Sin, Guilt, Justice and War: Paul Ramsey and Reinhold Niebuhr on the Moral Framework for Just War Thought’, Ph.D. diss., Southern Methodist University, 2007, 81.

and unique adaptation of repentance as a political motif from his teacher at Yale University, H. Richard Niebuhr. His movement from contrition to action is a constructive turn offered in an attempt to supply a more adequate theological description of the unique features of political acts. In chapters five and six I also demonstrate his distinctive use of the *esse/bene esse* construction (developed within a theology of covenant) to drive his emphasis on the theological significance of the contingency and temporality of politics. Finally, I conclude by using his phrase “politics as a kind of doing” to highlight several of the contributions which stem from his development of covenant and repentance as political concepts. I ground each of these interpretive moves in my attempt to read Ramsey as a political theologian.

I also deliberately avoid limiting his theological developments to a lesser role as platform for his casuistry, be it political, medical or sexual. Readers looking for a concluding chapter on the way in which his particular views on deterrence or counter-city warfare are informed by his view of covenant and repentance will be left wanting. So, too, will readers looking for a “crossover” chapter where I attempt to capture the underlying casuist techniques or interpretive themes uniting his political and medical or sexual writings. Instead, this study marks a conscious effort to hold up his contributions to political theology in their own light without tying their significance to the casuistry of a particular issue or situation. It is a fresh approach to his work that I believe, as mentioned above, takes advantage of and moves beyond the body of secondary literature currently available.

Finally, while I engage a number of Ramsey’s influences and interlocutors, the material of this thesis is largely an internal dialogue within his political writings



in an attempt to tease out the substance of his theological foundations. This is in part because repentance and covenant go through substantial changes across his body of work. It is also due to the significant role unpublished materials and items from his personal correspondence in the Ramsey Papers will play in my analysis. Most importantly, however, it marks an attempt to distil the abiding value of the perspective on political morality developed out of his theology of covenant and repentance.

I believe Ramsey's political writings offer a constructive set of themes for understanding how theological descriptions define and shape the political good. They also offer unique insight into the theological significance of contingency and temporality as features of moral political endeavors. These introductory comments should be adequate to acclimate the reader to the basic features and themes of the forthcoming study.

## **Section I**

### **Repentance and Political Action**

The first section of this study examines the concept of repentance in Ramsey's political theology. I present his use of the term "deferred repentance" to describe the political realm, as well as David Little's suggestion that it licenses the magistrate to employ immoral practices in war. I argue that this troubled and misleading concept draws heavily upon interpretive theological themes established in H. Richard Niebuhr's war articles. At the same time, Ramsey charts an alternative path from Niebuhr's emphasis on contrition by establishing a theology of repentance characterized by constructive political action. His reflections on repentance demonstrate his insistence on the inseparability of all moral political judgments from a prior theological account of certain features of human interaction, namely, the contingency and temporality of created existence.

## Chapter One

### **‘If Injustice is as American as Apple Pie’: Politics as Deferred Repentance**

The statesman responsible for policy decisions lives in a realm where ‘the science of the possible’ is definitive for all actions and in a realm of ‘deferred repentance’ so long as he remains convinced that politics is his vocation.<sup>1</sup>

– Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*

In both *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* and *War and the Christian Conscience* Ramsey describes politics as ‘an area of deferred repentance’.<sup>2</sup> The first of several troubling aspects of this claim is simply its face value. It sounds as if politicians are being given license to do whatever they want – at least for a time. Add to this the fact that one can hardly imagine John the Baptist of Matthew chapter three adding any qualifiers to the command ‘Repent’, much less one that suggests postponement of the commanded act, and its suitability for the field of moral theology is already in question. The aim of this chapter, then, is to identify what he means by deferred repentance and to establish a clear view of the misleading and troubling features of his account.

First, however, I want to preface this section on repentance with a brief turn to Ramsey’s early engagements with the philosophy of “absolute idealism”.<sup>3</sup> His doctoral dissertation at Yale University is an arduous and lengthy work, about which

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961), 309.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 12; *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* (New York: Association Press, 1961), 116.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘The Nature of Man in the Philosophy of Josiah Royce and Bernard Bosanquet’, Box 53, The Paul Ramsey Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Perkins Bostock Library, Duke University.

he later observes, ‘Pretty terrible composition it is’.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, while it will not occupy a substantial place in this study, I believe there are a few basic observations of that work which will prove helpful for the forthcoming examination of his theology of repentance.<sup>5</sup>

### 1.1 Absolute Idealism and the Pursuit of the Finite

The dissertation discusses “absolute idealism” in the philosophy of Josiah Royce and Bernard Bosanquet. Royce worked at Harvard University alongside William James in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Englishman Bosanquet wrote in London around the same time. Both delivered the prestigious Gifford lectures in natural theology, Royce from 1898 – 1900 in Aberdeen and Bosanquet from 1911 – 1912 in Edinburgh. Ramsey picked the topic and his subjects because of their influence – particularly that of Royce – on his supervisor, H. Richard Niebuhr. He reports much later that Niebuhr called him after reading the chapter that was eventually published as ‘The Idealistic View of Moral Evil’ to exclaim, ‘So, that’s where I learned what I believe’.<sup>6</sup>

One of the difficulties in grasping the argument of the piece is that Ramsey will occasionally paraphrase Bosanquet or Royce for pages at a time; the reader can be confident that he is asserting his own voice only in the concluding sections of each discussion which employ the pronoun “we”. Additionally, the work exhibits the steady influence of its advisor and in such cases lines are difficult to draw between

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Ramsey to David Attwood, August 12, 1984, Oliver O’Donovan personal collection.

<sup>5</sup> Readers seeking a systematic interpretation of Ramsey’s later writings through the lens of his dissertation should consult D. Stephen Long, *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism: The Ethics of Paul Ramsey* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993) or Kevin Carnahan, ‘Sin, Guilt, Justice and War: Paul Ramsey and Reinhold Niebuhr on the Moral Framework for Just War Thought’, Ph.D. diss., Southern Methodist University, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Ramsey to Attwood. See also Paul Ramsey, ‘The Idealistic View of Moral Evil: Josiah Royce and Bernard Bosanquet’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 6, no. 4 (1946), 554-589.

those claims clearly attempting to establish foundations for a lifetime of theological reflection and those more subtly inserted in anticipation of the examination committee members. In spite of these limitations, I want to offer for those readers who do not swim frequently in the waters of “absolute idealism” a few basic comments to assist with my later interpretation of repentance in his political theology.

Ramsey takes “absolute idealism” to be a philosophical way of describing human nature as both finite yet related to the infinite. Each human is an individual self, yet also in the presence of an Other. The “idealism” half of this construction attempts to protect the idea that individuality is finite (and not lost in infinity). “Idealism”, as he says, grants ‘moral significance to the finite in the sphere of the infinite without also giving it world-wrecking power’.<sup>7</sup> But he is also concerned that an unchecked idealist emphasis on the finite will produce limited individuals so isolated as to be beyond ethics. Said another way, ‘selves cannot be endowed with such isolation and caprice as to be able to make anarchy out of the “City of God”’.<sup>8</sup>

If unchecked “idealism” is a recipe for moral chaos, then he introduces the “Absolute” element to stem this tide. A concept of the “Absolute” tempers idealist isolationism with a ‘moral demand that human action be important to the universe as a whole’.<sup>9</sup> The balance of “absolute idealism” is then one where finite individual action gains significance only when the transcendent “Absolute” is held properly in

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<sup>7</sup> Ramsey, ‘Nature of Man’. 182-183.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 182. He learns from Royce that ‘the individual is not merely this, but such a this that its place can be taken by “no other”’ (9). Bosanquet speaks of finiteness as ‘essential to true infinity’ (38).

view. The “Absolute” does not overwhelm the individual; neither does the individual stand alone. Rather, individual action finds its place in relation to the “Absolute”.<sup>10</sup>

He observes on the basis of these claims that ‘the Absolute is not chosen as one goal among many, but indirectly as the one goal which the finite individual seeks in all his finite goals’.<sup>11</sup> What this means for ethics is that moral agents ‘serve the Absolute only by serving other finite individuals in the light of the Eternal’.<sup>12</sup>

Ramsey keeps his philosophical guard up through most of the dissertation, including these passages, but the implications for an explicitly theological ethic are not hard to see. God is not a finite good in competition with other finite goods; human agents faithfully serve the infinite God through finite acts of service.

He revisits several of these themes in his chapter on Dostoevsky in *Nine Modern Moralists*.<sup>13</sup> There he observes that the Christian tries ‘to realize in a *finite* way some likeness to the infinite perfections of God, striving only for a creaturely sharing in eternal life’.<sup>14</sup> This is a theological restatement of his earlier philosophical claim that ‘only finites are pursued directly’.<sup>15</sup> According to “absolute idealism” the isolated acts of finite individuals, though limited, should nonetheless remain in pursuit of the infinite.

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<sup>10</sup> An anthropological restatement of this claim comes in an early article from 1944: ‘Man is the structure of “finite freedom”, which is to say that, although a finite creature, it is his very nature always to have the indefinite spiritual urge to go beyond any actual self he has attained’. Paul Ramsey, ‘Natural Law and the Nature of Man’, *Christendom* 9, no. 3 (1944): 372.

<sup>11</sup> Ramsey, ‘Nature of Man’, 261.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 35-56. This chapter helps add substance to several of the more technical claims of his thesis. It was first printed as ‘God’s Grace and Man’s Guilt’, *Journal of Religion* 31, no. 1 (1951): 21-37. See also ‘No Morality without Immortality: Dostoevsky and the Meaning of Atheism’, *Journal of Religion* 36, no. 2 (1956): 90-108.

<sup>14</sup> Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists*, 96.

<sup>15</sup> Ramsey, ‘Nature of Man’, 261.

What absolute idealist philosophy gives Ramsey as he goes forward into the realm of political ethics is a sense of the moral significance of individual agency. The fact that ‘one is self-determined and committed “in act”’ makes the ‘finite creature the object of moral endeavor’.<sup>16</sup> This has ramifications for his understanding of judgment as the locus of political morality, as well as his appreciation for structures of political representation and authority. For now, though, further comments on his doctoral research will have to be set aside. What has been noted here provides sufficient insight into the shape and content of his thought on “absolute idealism” for an approach to his political ethics through the concept of repentance. I only ask that the reader take note of these initial observations in anticipation of their reintroduction later in the argument.

## **1.2 ‘Judgmental Criteria’ and the Public/Private Distinction**

One of the principal aims of his investigations into questions of political ethics in *War and the Christian Conscience* is an urge to understand the relationship between private morality and public morality. He inherits the tendency to divide moral issues along this line from Reinhold Niebuhr, but he is also uncomfortable with some of the conclusions that might be drawn from the distinction. Thus, in the introduction he justifies his study of the historical tradition of just war thinking by positioning himself against ‘the modern period’ where

Pragmatic politics, a complete distinction between personal and political morality, and the analysis of political and military decision wholly in situational terms (not only by secular political realists but also by too many

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 97, 422. He contrasts “idealism” and “absolute idealism” on precisely this point, saying, ‘It has been affirmed that idealism is self-condemned by being unable to find room for the certainty of our authorship and of responsibility for our own actions, which is the “inmost meaning of our freedom”. Against this it is counterposed the assertion by absolute idealism ... that only self-determination can give a tenable account of moral responsibility’ (86-87).

Protestant statements and all too many writers on Christian ethics and politics) have only exhibited or accomplished the return of mankind to significant citizenship in one city only.<sup>17</sup>

While Niebuhr is not his only target in view, it is significant that here and throughout the book he suggests a number of ways of combating the dangers of an overwrought public/private distinction.

One of those ways, as witnessed in the above passage, is to test the distinction against Augustine's Two Cities doctrine. Ramsey wrestles in chapter three with Ernest Barker's interpretation of Augustine and takes the opportunity to call attention to the fact that the Heavenly City is not "private", nor the Earthly City "political". Rather, 'as with justice as a personal virtue, so with social justice'.<sup>18</sup>

Another way he defends against a rigid distinction is by insisting that there cannot be a double standard for morality inside of politics and out. He insists that 'no case can be made for the view that what is wrong for a man may be right for a government'.<sup>19</sup> He also says that there is 'no essential difference between private morality and public morality' and gives the example that 'murder ... means the same

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<sup>17</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, xxii. His doctoral research was heavily influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941). In the discussion of Augustine he may also be responding to Reinhold Niebuhr, 'Augustine's Political Realism', in *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 119-146. For an extensive comparison of Niebuhr and Ramsey see Carnahan, 'Sin, Guilt, Justice and War'.

<sup>18</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 26.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.



whether this is done by individuals or states'.<sup>20</sup> This undivided moral fabric is a result of the same 'judgmental criteria' governing all aspects of human life.<sup>21</sup>

But Ramsey cannot entirely abandon the public/private distinction. He believes there is a unique moral context to the political realm where "the science of the possible" is definitive for all actions'.<sup>22</sup> Later, in *The Just War*, he calls this the 'structural difference between personal moral agency and political agency'.<sup>23</sup> And it is in his attempt to capture this structural difference that the term "deferred repentance" appears.

### 1.2.1 Politics as Deferred Repentance

Ramsey says that 'politics is also, for the Christian, a realm of "deferred repentance"'.<sup>24</sup> He explains this by first observing that 'whatever is immoral an individual, in his private capacity, should cease doing at once'.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, political morality may not be so immediately within reach. That is to say, political officials may not be able to set right all of the political wrongs before them with the expediency of an individual ceasing a personal action or habit. He calls politics the "science of the possible" to articulate these unique limitations on political agency.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 11, 12. As early as 1958 he notes that 'God places the requirement of righteousness in some sense upon the whole nation as well as upon individuals in their private affairs'. See *Nine Modern Moralists*, 250. Although this book was published in 1962, the last two chapters were written four years earlier as a part of the Clarence D. Ashley Lectures on Law and Theology. One corollary of this claim, as Michael C. McKenzie notes, is that Ramsey 'sees no necessary conflict between the demands of "agape" on the individual Christian and the demands of politics in the public realm'. See *Paul Ramsey's Ethics: The Power of 'Agape' in a Postmodern World* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 115.

<sup>21</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 309.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Ramsey, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968; reprint, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1983), 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 12.

This moral context is what marks ‘the main difference between private and public morality’.<sup>26</sup>

He does not revoke his claim that private and public morality are subject to the same “judgmental criteria”. Instead, he uses deferred repentance to emphasize that ‘the important thing is to make clear and keep clear in the public conscience the moral *context* of political action’.<sup>27</sup> He cites James Dougherty approvingly, saying, ‘although persons and states are subjected to the same fundamental code of justice ... they are not subjected to them in exactly the same mode’.<sup>28</sup> This modal difference can be found in the fact that politics is a realm where ‘repentance may have to be deferred’.<sup>29</sup>

Two examples will help clarify what Ramsey means when he calls politics a realm of deferred repentance. The first has to do with the magistrate’s inability to immediately rectify the moral evil of disproportionate weaponry. He writes,

There should be statesmen who themselves are quite clear as to the immorality of obliteration warfare (and as well as to the wrong of deterring evil by readiness to do the same thing) who are still willing to engage in negotiation directed to the end of limiting war to justifiable means and ends through a period of time in which they may have to defer their nation’s repentance.<sup>30</sup>

The catch, of course, is that the security which safeguards continued negotiations is to some degree assured by the deterrent effect of the immoral weapons. It is worth keeping in mind that when he speaks of the distinctive context of political endeavors, he also speaks of the magistrate who ‘remains convinced that politics is his

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. David Attwood aptly captures this tension in Ramsey’s account by saying, ‘The morality of politics is not to be set apart from the morality of any other subject, but neither is the morality of politics identical to private morality’. *Paul Ramsey’s Political Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 1992), 52.

<sup>27</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

vocation'.<sup>31</sup> To withdraw from office at each moment of deterrent-ensured freedom would be to abandon altogether the pursuit of right policy and proportionate weaponry. Yet the political official also cannot compromise the verdict that the deterrent effects of disproportionate weaponry are plainly and unavoidably immoral. Thus, he speaks of deferred repentance as that period of time purchased by immoral weapons but harnessed for the removal those weapons.

The second example comes by way of his discussions of race relations in *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*. Speaking of the US government's moral responsibilities to apartheid South Africa, he says,

[Politics] is an area of deferred repentance – but not forever. If there has been no propitious moment yet in recent history for the United States to take action ... that moment may soon come when ... our country can no longer defer making effective repentance for its complicity in injustice. Then we will face questions as to the use of strong and definite economic pressures with the purpose of radically assisting in the transformation of the whole structure of race relations in a country abroad. ... the fact is that ... we are inexorably involved in supporting economically the domestic policies of the present South African government.<sup>32</sup>

In this case he roots the idea of deferred repentance in the search for the politically prudent moment for effective moral action. He knows that each passing moment is another instance of the government's ongoing complicity with actions of South African political leaders. Yet, he also appreciates that such complicity will not be easily or quietly erased. Deferred repentance is an attempt to grant political officials

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 11. With the introduction of the language of vocation it is important to note that Ramsey sees a difference between this position and a "Lutheran" one, despite acknowledging debts to Luther. He notes elsewhere, 'For Brunner as for Luther, love is the motive which impels a Christian citizen or soldier or magistrate to stay in his position in the secular order. Justifying faith and love tell him *that* his vocation is there, but *what* he should do in the vocational setting of existing social institutions is determined entirely by natural justice and by the necessities of the situation, and not at all by love'. *Nine Modern Moralists*, 196-197. While deferred repentance is Ramsey's attempt to be attentive to the "necessities of the situation", he believes strongly that the motivating judgmental criteria of politics are determined by agape.

<sup>32</sup> Ramsey, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, 116.

the freedom to seek the most prudent and properly effective action rather than simply the most immediate.

The example of US dealings with South Africa reveals his sensitivity to the sheer contingency of purposive political manoeuvres. Michael McKenzie nicely captures his approach, saying, ‘in the political realm, with all its ambiguities, we must consider that *political prudence* has an important role to play, especially in matters of timing’.<sup>33</sup> Ramsey seeks in deferred repentance a way to appreciate those ambiguities without abandoning the significance of immoral political evils.

### 1.2.2 Three Further Observations

I want to make three further observations of the account of deferred repentance. The first is that he compromises neither the rigidity of the just war principles nor the ambiguity of political endeavors. He prefaces his claim that the nation’s repentance may need to be deferred by saying, ‘no ethics – least of all Christian ethics – gives us leave to kill another man’s children directly as a means of weakening *his* murderous intent. Preparation to do so – if that is the real object of our weapons – is intrinsically a grave moral evil’.<sup>34</sup> This refusal to collapse moral judgments in politics stems from the fact that ‘even the politics of deferred repentance is made quite impossible, where there is nothing in violation of fundamental principle to repent of, and to negotiate out of the realm of possibility’.<sup>35</sup> Whatever deferred repentance may mean, it cannot include a suspension of moral norms in the political realm.

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<sup>33</sup> McKenzie, *Paul Ramsey’s Ethics*, 119.

<sup>34</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 13. Eliminating the ‘judgmental criteria’ governing political action ‘makes it difficult to see what there is in need of forgiveness’.

Meanwhile, ‘the just war theory did not suppose that men possess the ability to discriminate between social orders at large by means of *clear and certain* principles of justice so as to declare one side or social system to be just and the other unjust in universal terms’.<sup>36</sup> In other words, simply having clear and certain principles of justice does not ensure that the outcomes of all political judgments are clear and certain. Neither do they allow for discriminations “in universal terms”. I will discuss his insistence that all political judgments are relative in chapter three. For the moment it is sufficient to note that he balances the indeterminacy of political endeavors with the rigidity of moral principles.<sup>37</sup>

My second observation is that deferred repentance is rooted in the temporal nature of political morality. In other words, political endeavors take time. This feature of his ethics leads David Attwood to say,

A statesman who is convinced that his nation is pursuing wrong policies may nevertheless stay in office and support those preparations while working over a period of time toward justifiable policies. A nation may have to take time to await the right political moment to put its repentance into effect, all the while aiming to deter war and working to limit the means and ends of war.<sup>38</sup>

Along this line of thinking Ramsey emphasizes that deferred repentance occupies the ‘meantime’ but is ‘not forever’.<sup>39</sup> He says, ‘only the statesman who knows [that what is wrong for man is wrong for the government] may be trusted not to defer his nation’s repentance forever’.<sup>40</sup> Until repentance can be enacted in the form of right

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>37</sup> He occasionally expresses this with the imagery of twilight, saying, ‘the fact of twilight does not mean you cannot tell day from night’. Paul Ramsey, unpublished notes, Box 38, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>38</sup> Attwood, *Paul Ramsey’s Political Ethics*, 52.

<sup>39</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 12; *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, 116. Ernest Ruede observes, ‘Ramsey bases his theological reflections upon this central theme of man’s living “in the meantime” with his fallen nature’. *The Morality of War* (Rensselaer, NY: Conventual Franciscan Publications, 1972), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 12. He argues that the magistrate should ‘nurture and “persuade” necessity... to bring the pre-existent substance of international relations somewhat nearer

policy and political practice, the posture of the Christian magistrate is one of persistent negotiation. That is, for Ramsey, a temporal pursuit and one that requires prudence of the highest order.

Finally, it is noteworthy that his account lacks clarity over the relationship between the repentance of the magistrate and the repentance of the nation. He speaks explicitly of deferring the ‘nation’s repentance’.<sup>41</sup> Yet, elsewhere he implies a sense of individual responsibility on the part of the magistrate when he says, ‘this may be better than keeping personal conscience clean and getting out of office’.<sup>42</sup> A survey of other writings offers no further clarity. On one hand, in a letter to Dean Kelley discussing race relations he rejects ‘the plainly anti-Christian notions of collective guilt ... that beguile so many today’.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, in ‘The Politics of Fear’ he says with regard to immoral practices in war that ‘grave guiltiness may be imputed to the military action of any nation’.<sup>44</sup> While I will return to this issue later, for now it is sufficient to note that Ramsey fails to provide a clear account of who or what is having its repentance deferred.

### 1.3 David Little’s Criticisms of Deferred Repentance

With this basic impression of deferred repentance in place, I want to turn to David Little’s criticisms in his essay ‘The Structure of Justification in the Political

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even to the historically realizable criteria of a very earthy politics and into conformity to principles themselves oriented toward practice’ (310).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Ramsey to Dean M. Kelley, August 4, 1969, Box 19, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘The Politics of Fear’, *Worldview* 3, no. 3 (1960): 6. An expanded version of this essay is reprinted in *War and the Christian Conscience*, 192-209 under the title ‘The Politics of Fear, or the End is Not Yet’.

Ethics of Paul Ramsey’.<sup>45</sup> Little is the only commentator to take up the concept of deferred repentance at any significant length; however, his criticisms are exaggerated in their attempt to catch Ramsey violating his own account of the principle of discrimination. For example, Little begins his discussion by saying that he ‘allows that a magistrate ... may find himself unable to “escape from the evil necessities” of intending and preparing “to kill another man’s children directly as a means of weakening *his* murderous intent”’.<sup>46</sup> This takes out of context the “evil necessities” claim by pairing it with an action Ramsey clearly judges to be ‘intrinsically a grave moral evil’ – killing another man’s children directly.<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, the original claim reads: ‘the Christian statesman has no escape from his evil necessities in the assertion that his nation’s power to retaliate against whole peoples is for the purpose of deterrence’.<sup>48</sup> Little misquotes Ramsey, substituting the “his” before “evil necessities” with “the”. The “no escape” of which Ramsey speaks is from *the statesman’s* accountability for his immoral use of disproportionate weaponry for national (and therein personal) security. Little’s reasoning cannot function in Ramsey’s account because it implies that the statesman may maintain clean personal conscience amid the inescapable and overbearing immorality of the state. While the state may indeed be inescapably immoral, Ramsey would neither (a) allow for clean personal conscience of the statesman, for whom he

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<sup>45</sup> David Little, ‘The Structure of Justification in the Political Ethics of Paul Ramsey’, in *Love and Society*, ed. James T. Johnson and David H. Smith (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 139-162. James T. Johnson mentions ‘deferrable repentance’ in the same publication. However, he does not discuss the term at sufficient length to merit treatment here. See James T. Johnson, ‘Morality and Force in Statecraft: Paul Ramsey and the Just War Tradition’, in *Love and Society*, ed. James T. Johnson and David H. Smith (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 110, italics added. See also Jeffrey Stout, ‘Ramsey and Others on Nuclear Ethics’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 19, no. 2 (1991): 214-215.

<sup>46</sup> Little, ‘The Structure of Justification’, 156.

<sup>47</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 11-12.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

thinks *leaving office* is the only way to having a clean conscience (even though that has its own set of problems) nor (b) justify the use of indiscriminate killing and/or disproportionate deterrence on any grounds.

Despite a propensity for such conceptual moves, it is important to establish a few basic features of Little's criticism. I begin with his belief that deferred repentance buys into the idea that in the realm of politics the ends justify the means. He says,

[Ramsey] goes on to admit that the magistrate ... perhaps ought to stay in office and continue taking part in grave moral evil in order 'to engage in negotiation directed to the end [sic!] of limiting war to justifiable means and ends through a period of time in which [he] may have to defer [his] nation's repentance.' We have here, from Ramsey's own pen, an example of its being *in some sense* reasonable or tolerable for a magistrate to make a decision by disregarding, temporarily, the application of the principle of discrimination to the *means* of action in favor of considering its application to the *ends* of action!<sup>49</sup>

Ramsey makes it clear that he does not believe that certain and determinate universal political ends (i.e., perpetual peace, the abolition of war, etc.) are possible this side of the eschaton.<sup>50</sup> One feature of our creaturely existence is that 'the *highest* we can actually aim at is the limited use of limited force; and God knows that is utopian enough'.<sup>51</sup> In the case of deferred repentance, however, Little argues that the principle of discrimination is being applied to the ends of political action in such a way as to justify any means.

Little thus believes that deferred repentance endorses 'an action in which a magistrate waived the principle of discrimination in the present in order to extend the

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<sup>49</sup> Little, 'The Structure of Justification'. 156. Bracketed text in original.

<sup>50</sup> His understanding of the progress available to the statesman in such situations can be seen when he speaks of 'Reinhold Niebuhr's celebrated maxim that politics is always "the proximate solution of insoluble problems", never their solution'. Paul Ramsey, 'War and Peace as a Religious Issue: On Extricating the Church from Liberal Disillusionment', unpublished essay, 1968, Oliver O'Donovan personal collection, 21-22.

<sup>51</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 128.



jurisdiction of that principle in the future'.<sup>52</sup> The magistrate 'may knowingly, if regretfully, intend to use indiscriminate means'.<sup>53</sup> He is playing upon the face value of the phrase. "Deferred repentance" sounds as if the magistrate is licensed to postpone taking the morally right course of action. He says, 'Ramsey contends that magistrates ... should be fully conscious of the grave moral evil implicit in the course of action he permits. They ought not in any way to minimize the gravity of the matter, but they simply ought to postpone doing something to rectify it'.<sup>54</sup> He interprets deferred repentance as a conceptual manoeuvre intended to liberate political officials from the burden of moral limitations.

If Little is right that under the terms of deferred repentance anything is legitimate which creates 'conditions in the future in which the principle of discrimination will be more widely observed', this leaves the magistrate without a clear sense of moral direction for present action.<sup>55</sup> By that I simply mean that if future political ends can be used to justify any present political means then judgments (in the present) are not governed by any moral limitations. Instead, in this scenario they would be governed by what Little calls 'the discretionary side of political reasoning' or 'teleological or prudential' reasoning.<sup>56</sup> Under normal circumstances the magistrate's discretion would be buffered by rigid moral principles. But according to Little in the case of deferred repentance those now only regulate the ends of action in the future.

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<sup>52</sup> Little, 'The Structure of Justification', 157.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 156. D. S. Long also interprets deferred repentance as a tool for excusing otherwise immoral actions. He says, 'given Ramsey's political philosophy ... the exercise of just war, or even an unjust war with deferred repentance, is the best that can be accomplished'. Long, *Tragedy*, 144.

<sup>55</sup> Little, 'The Structure of Justification', 157.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 150.

What are the hallmarks of discretion at work in isolation from moral principles? It has ‘no rationally determinate standards of assessment’ and excludes ‘rational certitude’.<sup>57</sup> For political activity this means that ‘calculating and predicting consequences is invariably uncertain and therefore indeterminate, because consequences are, to an important degree, uncontrollable and unforeseeable’.<sup>58</sup> Although his interpretive logic tends to twist and turn in difficult directions, we can translate his reading as follows: Little believes that deferred repentance describes a political realm so plagued by systemic indeterminacy that the magistrate is asked to produce a sense of moral direction simply on the basis of “discretion”. And that is not an entirely unwelcome conclusion for him. For Ramsey, it is. I now want to turn to his extended response to these claims in a later essay titled ‘Some Rejoinders’.

#### 1.4 Ramsey’s Response to David Little’s Criticisms

The response to Little can be separated into three essential elements. The first is his insistence that deferred repentance does not suspend the principles of discrimination and proportion, nor does it endorse immoral actions as means to certain ends. He expresses this by arguing that ‘the *sole* point under discussion was the morality of *deterrence* – *not* actualizing indiscriminate warfare or subsuming under “deferred repentance” the killing of hostages as “an excusable, if repulsive act,” to which Little swiftly moves’.<sup>59</sup> He continues, saying, ‘by “deferred repentance” in official actions I simply meant the use of the time granted by deterrence to “ransom the time” by a creative political reconstruction of deterrence

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘Some Rejoinders’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 4, no. 2 (1976): 209. He also says that deferred repentance concerns ‘the single issue of deterrence’ (210).

systems’.<sup>60</sup> By limiting the applicability of the term to deterrence he eliminates the suggestion that it can be used to license patently immoral acts, such as the execution of children.

This qualification was not present in the original account. Ramsey spoke there of magistrates who ‘are quite clear as to the immorality of *obliteration warfare* (and as well as the wrong of deterring evil by readiness to do the same thing) who are still willing to engage in negotiation’.<sup>61</sup> By restricting the discussion to deterrence he aims both to focus our attention on the moral demand for negotiation and to insist that ‘surely it could not be supposed that I meant the meanwhile to include on occasion executing city-hostages or actually using a fight-the-unjust-war policy’.<sup>62</sup>

This comes across clearly when he says,

When I spoke about the statesman ‘negotiating [something] out of the realm of possibility’ no doubt I meant unjust fight-the-war policies as well as counter-people deterrence.... But although I spoke of living with unjust war policies while effecting the reformation of such policies no less than transforming our deterrence system, both were *policies* and policy-initiatives to change those policies were at issue.<sup>63</sup>

I take his shift into the domain of deterrence to be an attempt to emphasize that the magistrate always remains firmly under the limitations of just war principles.

This also comes to bear upon Little’s suggestion that he legitimizes ‘an action in which a magistrate waived the principle of discrimination ... in order to extend the jurisdiction of the principle in the future’.<sup>64</sup> Ramsey resists this by saying, ‘if something is wrong to do, it is also wrong ... to make oneself “conditionally willing”

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>61</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 12, italics added.

<sup>62</sup> Ramsey, ‘Some Rejoinders’, 210. He repeats a similar phrase later, saying that the magistrate is ‘not likely to suppose that meantime he can be excused for engaging in a few tit-for-tat city exchanges’ (211).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Little, ‘The Structure of Justification’, 157.

to do that, for some good end'.<sup>65</sup> Deferred repentance cannot mean 'that statesmen ought simply to sin bravely and ever more bravely repent'.<sup>66</sup> Rather, it means that magistrates pursue discriminate means (and ends) in a political realm where the rectification of immoral policy may not be immediately available (or prudent).

Mention of prudence brings me to the second essential element of his response: an objection to the concept of discretion. He says, 'I would say prudence or practical wisdom is needed ... not "discretion" – which, as Little reads me, seems to mean arbitrary, baseless choice'.<sup>67</sup> He later objects to the conclusion that deferred repentance means that 'judgments concerning ends or consequences in ethics and politics are arbitrarily discretionary'.<sup>68</sup> The contrast to arbitrary discretion is purposive action in accordance with moral principles. He intends the account of deferred repentance to highlight that 'it is required of statesmanship to fashion policy in the right direction and to step *without delay* toward more purposive and feasible weapons systems'.<sup>69</sup> The question is how to interpret the immediacy of his demand for moral action alongside his sensitivity to the role of timing in right political action.

He saw a shining example of such action in the announcement by US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in June, 1962 that the US would no longer prepare to target civilian populations with nuclear weapons in the event of an attack.<sup>70</sup> The lack of support for the policy change from churches and ethicists frustrated Ramsey. He complained, 'I remain amazed that anyone can ... fail to see a signal and inherent moral difference between a policy of prompt massive retaliation

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<sup>65</sup> Ramsey, 'Some Rejoinders', 209.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>69</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 311.

<sup>70</sup> See his comments in *The Just War*, 211-213. McKenzie rightly notes that it was for Ramsey a 'watershed moment'. See *Paul Ramsey's Ethics*, 130-136 for the effect it had on his account of deterrence.

and McNamara's policy of greater discrimination, greater flexibility, greater control, allowing for graduation up or down in our military response if war comes'.<sup>71</sup>

McNamara's appreciation for the need for more technical precision and strategic targeting in the realm of nuclear weaponry appealed to Ramsey's fervent insistence on discrimination between non-combatants and combatants in war.

Jeffrey Stout observes of this occasion, 'the more Ramsey thought about the McNamara statement, the less inclined he was to condemn U.S. policy as wicked.... McNamara's statement satisfied Ramsey... that non-combatant immunity had begun to inform his government's strategic thinking'.<sup>72</sup> Stout is right that he was enthusiastic about the policy change. But he was more pleased with McNamara than with US policy as a whole (which continued to employ indiscriminate weaponry with deterrent effects in other ways). McNamara's announcement was for him a purposive movement of policy more in alignment with the just war principles, a great moral achievement and an example of repentance no longer being deferred. In other words, it was the opposite of Little's description of arbitrary discretion.

This brings me to the final essential element of his response: an argument over indeterminacy. Ramsey feels that Little overstates his sensitivity to the uncertainty of moral endeavors, saying,

I am supposed to believe [on Little's interpretation] that decision-making in regard to consequences is 'systematically indeterminate', 'immeasurable', a 'new creation'; that 'there are no rationally determinate standards of assessment according to which agape can finally be measured'; that consequences are invariably uncertain, unpredictable and therefore indeterminate.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 266.

<sup>72</sup> Stout, 'Ramsey and Others', 215-216.

<sup>73</sup> Ramsey, 'Some Rejoinders', 206.

Politically speaking, this chaotic unpredictability strips the office of the magistrate of the ability to make any purposive moral judgments.

I mentioned above that one key ingredient of deferred repentance was a sense of the contingency inherent in any pursuit of the good. Ramsey acknowledges this and takes (some) responsibility for the misreading. He says,

I accept a degree of fault for describing political futures as systematically indeterminate and rationally incalculable and uncertain, without qualification. Still I may insinuate that there is some flaw in an interpretation of these writings that does not take account of the context of those expressions or of the type of rational calculation that was placed in contrast to political decision-making.<sup>74</sup>

He is right to say that he should have qualified his comments on indeterminacy. This is especially true in light of his tendency elsewhere to criticize the ‘ethics of ambiguity’ for being morally relativist.<sup>75</sup> But he is also right that “indeterminacy” which overwhelms any possibility of distinguishing between right and wrong is not identical to “indeterminacy” as an observation of the fact that in politics events do not always unfold exactly as we would like them to unfold, or even as we envision them unfolding. And Ramsey clearly has the latter in mind when speaking of deferred repentance. It is an admission that we do not control every element of our political lives and that this fundamental contingency must be accounted for in a theological perspective on political ethics.

### **1.5 Assessing Politics as Deferred Repentance**

His comments in ‘Some Rejoinders’ mark the last mention of deferred repentance in his published works. And while the next two chapters will try to add

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>75</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘The Just Revolution’, *Worldview* 16, no. 10 (1973): 38.

context and content to his political theology of repentance, it is important to have a clear view of this fundamental account before moving forward. What should shine through most clearly is that however awkwardly the phrase may fit its intended function, it is essentially a call for purposive political action in accordance with just war principles. His answer to the question of how to understand the difference between private and public morality is to paint a picture of the magistrate acting rightly and prudently even in a realm wrought with tension between unbreakable moral principles and an order built on immoral weaponry. Accordingly, I want to make several concluding observations about this troubled and misleading concept.

It is important not to miss in the language of deferred repentance his refusal to abandon determinations of justice and morality in the political realm. In the insistence on “judgmental criteria” lies the call for negotiation and policy change. Ramsey sees that to *pursue* right policy and to *move* in the direction of political goods requires engagement with a realm that is plagued by layers of immoral policy and practice. Little’s criticism is inadequate precisely because it fails to appreciate the difference between embracing indiscriminate weaponry (by waiving the principle of discrimination in the present) and the altogether different enterprise of persistently negotiating for discriminate policies in a time made safe by immoral weaponry. Acknowledging our complicity with and responsibility for that immoral safety is not something that Ramsey thinks can be avoided. But neither is he willing to eliminate the possibility of moving toward the political good.

One example of this comes by way of a discussion he has in personal correspondence with Dean Kelley over the witness of political protests. He observes that Christians ‘better make up our minds’ about whether the sinful character of

human nature will be taken as ‘a permanent part of our historical analysis’.<sup>76</sup> By “permanent” he means consistently applied. He is criticizing those who invoke the depths of human sinfulness in the condemnation of political authority but neglect to account for it as an influence over, say, protests against that authority. Thus, he says, ‘we should know that if injustice and/or violence is as American as apple pie, it is also as human as cereal foods, and that the cry of the human heart in the Psalms is not soon going to be avoided. Then, a great deal of the self-denigration on American violence should be stricken out, or set in Christian perspective’.<sup>77</sup> I take Ramsey’s point here to be that if the context and character of institutional political actions are shaped by the weight of human sin, then Christians must also keep in mind that it is not limited to the institutional realm. This is to address the issue of the relationship between private/public morality that led him into the discussion of deferred repentance. There may be unique limitations that plague moral political agency, but the task of the Christian is to work for political good in a violent world— a world where injustice is both as American as apple pie and as human as cereal foods.

This recognition should not fuel a sense of resignation or a relinquishing of moral judgments in politics. Rather, he is making a more basic claim about the limitations of any pursuit of political good. As he says in *The Just War*, ‘even a great actor on the world stage has to acknowledge that not all of what ought to be can be

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<sup>76</sup> Ramsey to Kelley.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. The argument is essentially about the integrity of the use of terms such as violence and injustice. Ramsey cannot accept the suggestion that violent acts of political protest are of an essentially different nature than violent state acts. Thus, he says, ‘Let us not ruin the words “violence” (and the ethics pertaining to its use, which is in our heritage) and “injustice” by mixing them all up, just in order to avoid admitting that “riots in a blighted area” do “introduce violence into a hitherto non-violent district,” though not into a hitherto just situation. Then only can we discourse as Christians about the morally relevant circumstances that might warrant violence and those that do not. In short, to put it bluntly, this use of “violence” is about as discriminating as “law and order”; it represents, in fact, the same polarization to which we Christians ought to be able to bring some healing insight.’



*politically* done; and that not all that politically ought to be done can be done *by us*'.<sup>78</sup> Deferred repentance is not an attempt to diminish, ignore or justify the amount of injustice that *ought* to be set right. It is an attempt to take seriously the systemic political limitations on any attempt to rectify that injustice.

It is also worth bringing back into view my earlier observation that he is not clear about who or what is having its repentance deferred. On one hand, it appears that the magistrate is deferring repentance for participation in, and benefit from, the unjust practices of the nation, as well as for the failure to enact just policies through negotiation. This view reflects sentiments that he expresses elsewhere with the observation that 'there is no such thing as "the mind and heart of collective man"', but only individual men and women engaged in collective action by means of a gradation of leaders who are also individuals with a mixture of motives in what they do in public and private life'.<sup>79</sup> The magistrate is responsible for the policy-formation of the nation and therefore partakes in the immorality of unjust deterrent weapons.

On the other hand, he also explicitly says that magistrates defer 'their nation's repentance', and he seems to attribute agency to the nation as a whole when he says 'there is a difference between the actions of individuals and state acts'.<sup>80</sup> This would seem to accommodate the idea that the magistrate's negotiations operate in opposition to the nation's immoral policies rather than in collusion with them. In this way he impresses a distance between immoral policies and actions of magistrates to correct those policies.

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<sup>78</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 22.

<sup>79</sup> Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists*, 137.

<sup>80</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 12, 310. He speaks elsewhere of the 'informed conscience of the nation'. 'Apologia Pro Vita Sua—One decade, that is', Box 39, Ramsey Papers, 37. He also speaks of a nation acting justly in *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 242.

At this point the observations on his doctoral research with which I began this chapter may be of use. He learned from “absolute idealism” the idea that finite individual action gains moral significance in proper relation to the infinite “Absolute”. It also called for an account of moral obligation to be rooted in the pursuit of finite goods with zeal for the infinite. The result is a robust sense of the importance of moral self-determination through act and the pursuit of finite goods.

The way that Ramsey applies the moral responsibility of the nation to the magistrate draws upon this philosophical idea that a finite agent gets not only its identity but also its moral obligation from the “Absolute”. At the same time, the distinctive location of the finite and the significance of self-determination resembles his insistence that the magistrate works independently against the grain of political structures which are not easily changed for the better. This is certainly not a perfect comparison, but what it reveals is that the question of whether deferred repentance concerns the conscience of the magistrate or the conscience of the nation does not impact the resulting account of political obligation. Both concepts point to the moral significance of the political act of judgment and the pursuit of limited goods. This is nowhere clearer than in his claim in *The Just War* that ‘all action that has in view the transformation of the world political system must be located in this world and not some other’.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, I want to address his response to Little’s criticism with the suggestion that deferred repentance concerns the ‘single issue of deterrence’.<sup>82</sup> As I mentioned above, this repositions his claim and emphasizes more strongly the time for negotiation purchased by immoral deterrent effects of disproportionate weaponry.

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<sup>81</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 390.

<sup>82</sup> Ramsey, ‘Some Rejoinders’, 210.

Yet, I do not believe this qualification frees him from several of the lingering questions surrounding his account of deferred repentance. For instance, what becomes of his use of the term to describe the political situation with South Africa? What of the charge that the phrase itself is misleading given the argumentative function he assigns to it? And most significantly, how does an idea of “deferred repentance” connect to more explicitly theological accounts of repentance as an integral practice within the church?

Ramsey fails to explore the answers to these questions. Rather, the engagement with Little leads him instead to say ‘I have often regretted the expression’.<sup>83</sup> In spite of his abandonment of the concept, the next two chapters of this thesis aim to show how he inherits this use of repentance from H.R. Niebuhr and repackages the concept to uphold the theological importance of constructive political action in Christian ethics. This takes us into discussions of the role of repentance in determination of political norms in his lesser-known writings, unpublished papers and letters.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 209. The problem with this recantation is that he attributes any misunderstanding not to a lack of clarity in his own argument, but to the fact that the term ‘seemed to keep readers... from reading with discernment what I said under that head’. I have tried to show that the troubled nature of deferred repentance is not entirely attributable to the reader.

## **Chapter Two**

### **From Contrition to Action: H. Richard Niebuhr's War Articles and Ramsey's Politics as Deferred Repentance**

I guess to many people I would seem like an out and out Niebuhrian in my thinking.<sup>1</sup>

– Paul Ramsey to C.F. Rall, May 28, 1942

Much has been written on the influence of Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr on the work of Paul Ramsey. The majority of this literature follows one of two patterns. The first argues that despite having studied under H. Richard during his formative years at Yale, Ramsey ultimately adopts a framework for political thinking more determinatively shaped by Reinhold's political realism. An example of this approach can be found in the work of Stanley Hauerwas, who wrote during his early years as a scholar, 'I am coming to the conclusion that Reinhold Niebuhr is more of an influence on Ramsey than Richard'.<sup>2</sup> This stems from the belief that he, like Reinhold, 'is content with a few basic principles which he assumes are sufficient to give an account of every moral issue'.<sup>3</sup> Ramsey's own pen appears to support this interpretive pattern when, for instance, he observes that 'in all that I have written on the morality of war I have been quite consciously drawing upon a wider theory of

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ramsey to C.F. Rall, May 28, 1942, Box 23, The Paul Ramsey Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Perkins-Bostock Library, Duke University.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas to Lisa Cahill, August 2, 1977, accession number 95-111, Stanley Hauerwas Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Perkins-Bostock Library, Duke University. Additional support for this view can be seen in select theses on Ramsey. Edwin F. O'Brien notes 'More than any other thinker, Reinhold Niebuhr served as a catalyst for the thoughts of Ramsey on love and justice'. See 'The Origin and Development of Moral Principles in the Writings of Paul Ramsey', S.T.D. diss., Pontifical University of St. Thomas, 1976, Box 54, Ramsey Papers. See also Kevin Carnahan, 'Sin, Guilt, Justice and War: Paul Ramsey and Reinhold Niebuhr on the Moral Framework for Just War Thought', Ph.D. diss., Southern Methodist University, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Hauerwas to Cahill.

statecraft and of political justice to propose an extension within the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr'.<sup>4</sup>

The second pattern believes that despite settling on political arguments which draw upon Reinhold's realism, Ramsey develops his ethics out of a transformationist motif taken explicitly from H. Richard's fifth type of Christ transforming culture.

This view is most prominent in D. Stephen Long's *Tragedy, Tradition,*

*Transformism: The Ethics of Paul Ramsey*. He observes that 'Niebuhr's

transformationist motif provided Ramsey's primary impulse in Christian ethics. All of his work was an extension of Niebuhr's "Christ transforming culture".<sup>5</sup> William

Werpehowski's *American Protestant Ethics and the Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr*

also reflects this notion when describing Ramsey's "love transforming justice"

theme. He notes that his 'career in writing on specific moral topics was an effort to mediate dynamism, transformation, or conversion'.<sup>6</sup> As with the first pattern,

Ramsey's own pen appears to confirm this view when he says in a 1953 letter to

Joseph Fletcher, 'I would phrase my present point of view as "love transforming justice" which in ethical terms is the equivalent of [Niebuhr's] "Christ transforming culture"'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Ramsey, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968; reprint, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1983), 260.

<sup>5</sup> D. Stephen Long, *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism: The Ethics of Paul Ramsey* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 189-190. See also John Madison Carville, Jr., 'Love Transforming Justice in the Christian Ethics of Paul Ramsey', S.T.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1973; John Philip Boyle, 'Paul Ramsey's Motif "Christ Transforming the Natural Law" in Light of its Theological and Philosophical Influences', Ph.D. diss., St. Louis University, 1990; and Michael C. McKenzie, *Paul Ramsey's Ethics: The Power of 'Agape' in a Postmodern World* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 145-150.

<sup>6</sup> William Werpehowski, *American Protestant Ethics and the Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 34.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Ramsey to Joseph Fletcher, March 5, 1953, Box 8, Ramsey Papers. He continues, 'I remember a conversation with him once in which I expressed the hope that if he had been considering my book in the writing of his own, he would have classified my point of view under his "conversionist" type. He immediately said that he would have done so and went on to remark that he judged I was attempting to state the position of "Christ transforming natural law" while his own position was that

Let me be clear at the outset that these two patterns of interpretation concern matters of emphasis rather than distinct schools of thought in scholarship assessing the relationship between Ramsey and the Niebuhrs. None of the authors mentioned above would claim that he attends to one at the exclusion of the other—his debts to both are unavoidable. Nonetheless, there is something to the fact that a glance at the opening quotation of this chapter – ‘I guess to many people I would seem like an out and out Niebuhrian in my thinking’ – will invoke thoughts of Reinhold in some interpreters and H. Richard in others.<sup>8</sup> This is reflective of a tendency in secondary literature to read his work through the lens of either Reinhold’s political realism or H. Richard’s transformationist motif.

It sometimes proves helpful to break established patterns of interpretation by pursuing an alternative line of inquiry. I want to attempt such an exercise by here calling attention to a common theme in both patterns, namely, they overlook the significance of H. Richard Niebuhr’s political writings and their impact on Ramsey’s political ethics. Said another way, Reinhold may not have been the only Niebuhr who concretely influenced Ramsey’s politics and H. Richard may have offered him more than the transformationist motif. The argument of this chapter is that H. Richard’s description of repentance as the determinative motif for Christian thought on war shapes and informs Ramsey’s concept of politics as deferred repentance. Thus, it begins with the assumption that to read Niebuhr’s legacy in Ramsey’s political ethics in patterns which either subordinate that legacy to Reinhold’s

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of “Christ transforming relativism”. Notice also that Ramsey opens *Nine Modern Moralists* with the claim ‘The unifying theme may be stated as “Christ transforming the Natural Law”, itself framed with conscious reference to Professor H. Richard Niebuhr’s formulation of one main type of Christian social outlook as “Christ transforming Culture” or converting the works of men, in his book *Christ and Culture*’. *Nine Modern Moralists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> Ramsey to Rall. He was, on this occasion, speaking of H. Richard Niebuhr.

influence or limit it to the transformationist theme is to underestimate both Ramsey's complexity as a political thinker and Niebuhr's contributions to the field of political ethics.<sup>9</sup> This is not to supplant or diminish the hold Reinhold's realism has on Ramsey. Rather, it highlights his previously unrecognized inheritance of a distinctly H.R. Niebuhrian interpretive theme. It also furthers the task of explaining and interpreting his use of repentance as a motif for political ethics.

## 2.1 Framing the Inquiry

I aim to demonstrate (a) the significance of H. Richard Niebuhr's war articles as an influence on Ramsey's political ethics and (b) his explicit engagement with the Niebuhrian theme of repentance in his comments on the nature of the political realm and the shape of right magisterial action. Fortunately, the burden of the first task has been lightened by the treatment of both thinkers in Richard B. Miller's *Interpretations of Conflict*. There he insists on reading the series of war articles published in the 1930s and 40s as serious contributions to political theology.<sup>10</sup> He helps readers see that Niebuhr offers an 'alternative metaphor for interpreting and evaluating war' because his 'overall purpose in the war articles is not to undermine ethical discourse about war and peace but to *repoeticize* war'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> D.S. Long, quoted above, is particularly susceptible to the tendency to stunt Ramsey's complexity as a political thinker. Because he inherits the assumption that *Christ and Culture* is a destructive influence on Christian ethics, his restriction of Ramsey's development to an extension of this theme betrays an uncharitable posture towards his basic moral concepts, political or otherwise. See Long, *Tragedy*, 190.

<sup>10</sup> He says, 'These war articles have eluded analysis in recent studies of war and peace because Niebuhr's references to pacifism and nonpacifism seem either obscure or inconsistent'. Richard B. Miller, *Interpretations of Conflict: Ethics, Pacifism, and the Just-War Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 126. He limits the war articles to those published in *The Christian Century*. I include selected articles on war and politics published elsewhere from the same time period. See also the early version of this argument in Richard B. Miller, 'H. Richard Niebuhr's War Articles: A Transvaluation of Value', *Journal of Religion* 68 (1988): 242-262.

<sup>11</sup> Miller, *Interpretations*, 126-127.

Additionally helpful is Miller's recognition that Ramsey's political ethics operate within this attempt to repoeticize war. He observes that several of the emphases in the war articles – e.g., innocent suffering in war, neighbor-love or other-regard, nonexceptionalism in political ethics – are developed more explicitly (and with more technical attention) by Ramsey.<sup>12</sup> The only complaint to be lodged against Miller's observations is that somewhere in the transition from Niebuhrian themes to Ramseyian ethics the motif of *repentance* disappears. The reader is given no reason to think that it holds any place in Ramsey's writings on politics. But, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, repentance is part of his basic understanding of the political realm in *War and the Christian Conscience*.<sup>13</sup>

With this in mind I will attend initially (and with Miller's help) to Niebuhr's war articles and his use of repentance as the defining motif for a Christian response to war. Once this account is in place I will trace Ramsey's appropriation of the motif and its incorporation into his perspective on purposive political action. In doing so I aim to demonstrate the significance of repentance in his theological interpretation of politics as captured by the movement from contrition to action.

## 2.2 Repentance and the Christian Response to War

In the 1930s and 40s Niebuhr published a series of short and unsystematic essays voicing his dissatisfaction with theological interpretations of war and political

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 143. According to Miller, 'Ramsey's work is driven by the conviction that the seemingly esoteric tropes in his mentor's work are directly relevant to problems surrounding modern statecraft and nuclear technology'. Werpehowski makes a similar move when he says that 'Ramsey's just war theory may be read as an expression in normative ethics of Niebuhr's general reflections on war and God's activity in the world. The latter's focus on innocence and suffering and the need for Christians to foster a people's repentance of egoism and injustice finds parallels in Ramsey's principles of discrimination and relative justice'. *American Protestant Ethics*, 68-69.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961).



conflict. He sought an alternative set of images and concepts such as judgment, repentance and crucifixion to reorient Christian discourse on war. The most famous of these pieces – ‘The Grace of Doing Nothing’ in *The Christian Century* – was part of his only published exchange with his brother, Reinhold.<sup>14</sup>

His disappointment stems from what he sees as a false choice being forced upon Christians between two ‘misconceptions’ in thinking on war.<sup>15</sup> The first misconception wrongly believes that Christianity ‘calls for specific sorts of domestic, economic, or political action’.<sup>16</sup> Both a non-pacifist calling for a specific military initiative and a pacifist calling all Christians to register as conscientious objectors would fall under this category. The second misconception calls for the opposite response, claiming that Christianity turns away from demands for specific political action because faithful obedience takes shape ‘only in peculiarly religious actions, such as prayer and worship’.<sup>17</sup> Again, both a pacifist withdrawing support for all military action and a nonpacifist relinquishing moral influence on war by arguing that “might is right” would fall under this category. What cuts across the pacifist/nonpacifist divide is the way the two misconceptions force Christians to choose sides ‘in some confused political struggle’ or to retire ‘from the political and social life, at least insofar as they are Christians’.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, ‘The Grace of Doing Nothing’, *The Christian Century* 49 (1932): 378-380. For the full exchange see *The Christian Century Reader*, ed., Harold E. Fey and Margaret Frakes (New York: Association Press, 1962). Reinhold’s response is titled ‘Must We Do Nothing?’

<sup>15</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, ‘The Christian Church and the World’s Crisis’, *Christianity and Society* 6, no. 3 (1941): 11-17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* D.S. Long’s interpretation of this point is to say, ‘H.R. Niebuhr’s methodology cannot make discriminations between warriors or pacifists’. I think it is fairer to say that he is more fundamentally interested in calling attention to the hubris of such discriminations in light of the radically transcendent judgment of God. See Long, *Tragedy*, 21.

I want to establish a clear picture of each misconception before moving forward. The first justifies political action with religious sentiment. This most frequently takes the form of a Christian endorsement of retribution in war. In ‘War as Crucifixion’ Niebuhr calls this the ‘moral theory’ of war and observes that it ‘interprets [war] as an event in a universe in which the laws of retribution hold sway. ... According to this theory, war begins with a transgression of international, or natural, or divine law and continues in the effort of the law’s upholders to bring the offenders to justice’.<sup>19</sup> His acute sensitivity to the hubris behind certain judgments of justice and injustice leads him to insist on the ambiguity of any attempt to prosecute war as retribution – he argues that ‘no scheme of vindictive justice fits the experiences of war’.<sup>20</sup> He also frequently repeats the claim that ‘the greatest difficulty of all which the moral theory faces is the fact that in war the burden of suffering does not fall on the guilty, even when guilt is relatively determinable, but on the innocent’.<sup>21</sup> It is here that he calls for ‘a total revolution of our minds and hearts’.<sup>22</sup> The inescapability of undeserved suffering of the innocent in war – even in wars prosecuted by those with claims to justice – calls for repentance.

The second misconception wrongly considers politics to be merely (and hopelessly) a realm of self-assertion and power. Christians are thus wrongly encouraged to withdraw from politics altogether on the grounds that there is no place for the moral claims of religious faith. He expresses this sentiment in his

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<sup>19</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, ‘War as Crucifixion’, *The Christian Century* 60 (1943): 513.

<sup>20</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, ‘A Christian Interpretation of War’, in *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, by H. Richard Niebuhr, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 165. He continues, ‘that the greater pain and loss come to the greater offenders is not evident in the history of human war or in any particular war’.

<sup>21</sup> Niebuhr, ‘War as Crucifixion’, 513.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 515. See also H. Richard Niebuhr, ‘War as the Judgment of God’, *The Christian Century* 59 (1942): 631. He adds, ‘Christians cannot interpret God’s action in war as the judgment of vengeance for another and profounder reason: the pains of war do not descend primarily on the unjust but on the innocent. Wars are crucifixions’ (631).

commentary on inactivity in 'The Grace of Doing Nothing'. He speaks of the 'conservative believer' who 'does nothing in the international crisis because he believes that the way of Japan is the way of all nations, that self-interest is the first and only law of life'.<sup>23</sup> This is later called 'the amoral theory' in 'War as Crucifixion'. It interprets war as 'a conflict of powers in which victory with its fruits belongs to the stronger and in which moral words or phrases are nothing but instruments of power by means of which emotions are aroused and men are unified'.<sup>24</sup> As mentioned above, 'this view is held both by certain balance-of-power advocates of unlimited participation in war, and by certain pacifists who wash their hands of war because it makes no moral difference which side wins in a conflict of pure power'.<sup>25</sup> The hubris of the amoral theory takes both pacifist and nonpacifist forms.

Niebuhr subverts both misconceptions with a series of alternative images and concepts for interpreting war. One of these is the stark contrast between the guilty thieves crucified on each side of the cross of innocent Jesus. In 'War as the Judgment of God' he says, 'one cannot then speak of God acting in war as judge of the nations without understanding that it is through the cross of Christ more than through the cross of thieves that he is acting upon mankind'.<sup>26</sup> He again invokes this image in 'War as Crucifixion', saying,

Three men were crucified on Calvary, all, it appears, on more or less the same charges of insurrection. Two of them were malefactors who actually desired to overturn the established order, whether for patriotic or personal

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<sup>23</sup> Niebuhr, 'The Grace of Doing Nothing', 378.

<sup>24</sup> Niebuhr, 'War as Crucifixion', 513. Ramsey uses this same concept to critique Paul Tillich's analysis of politics in *Nine Modern Moralists*, 187. He says 'unless Tillich can supply a satisfactory concept of justice, his own thought will be open to an objection he seeks to avoid, namely, that he interprets justice exclusively as a function of power expressed in encounters and as in no way its judge or moral criterion'.

<sup>25</sup> Niebuhr, 'War as Crucifixion', 513.

<sup>26</sup> Niebuhr, 'War as the Judgment', 631.

motives; yet they were not alike since one recognized the at least relative justice of his punishment while the other remained unrepentant. The third cross carried one who was innocent of the charge made against him; yet ambiguously so, since he was establishing a kingdom of a strange sort which held unknown dangers for the Roman order and the Jewish law.<sup>27</sup>

Two thieves maintain their innocence, one justly and the other unjustly. Two thieves accept their punishment, one deservedly and the other undeservedly. These layers of ambiguity show the power of political violence to obfuscate moral goodness.

Calvary also highlights the universality of moral failure and the way that innocent suffering relativizes all claims to justice in war. This demonstrates ‘the sublime character of real goodness’ by subjecting both activity and inactivity in response to war to the judgment of God.<sup>28</sup>

Niebuhr weaves themes of judgment, suffering and crucifixion across the war articles. Yet the one theme which appears, in Miller’s turn of the phrase, ‘from the first to the last of the war articles’, is that of repentance.<sup>29</sup> Whether arguing against utilitarianism, situationism or idealism; whether using the language of judgment, the kingdom of God or crucifixion; whether addressing pacifism, coercionism or the false alternatives of the moral and amoral theory – he consistently settles on repentance as the primary motif for a Christian response to war.

Miller describes the way in which ‘Niebuhr’s dissatisfaction with Christian discourse about war ... led him to chart an alternative course, on which repentance to

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<sup>27</sup> Niebuhr, ‘War as Crucifixion’, 514.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Perhaps a brief note on what Niebuhr means here by relativization would prove helpful. Miller notes that ‘the problem is not in the danger of relativization, but in its *necessity*. For, unless the moralistic pretenses of pacifists and nonpacifists are relativized in light of the sovereign, universal cause of divine action, they will assume a stature of theistic proportions. They will lead us to act in haste, confident that our cause is the right one, without any understanding of the true events of history and their actual meaning’. Miller, *Interpretations*, 138. He rightly notes that the relativization of the cross, for Niebuhr, erases any potential for moral superiority by stripping away such distinctions in the face of the judgment of God. The relativism produces a particular reticence concerning moral pronouncements for what Christians “should do” (or not do) in response to war.

<sup>29</sup> Miller, *Interpretations*, 127.

divine judgment, not moral action, is axiomatic'.<sup>30</sup> The juxtaposition of repentance and moral action is a common theme in his response to war; it stems from his 'suggestion that we are misled not only by conventional canons of morality, but by *morality itself*'.<sup>31</sup> Because repentance draws attention to 'the hubris behind every moral endeavor', it is an act which must be undertaken altogether separately from any 'social fruits' that may follow from it.<sup>32</sup> As Niebuhr says, 'all this does not mean that Christian faith has no social applications or a relevance to the crisis of our days. ... It does not mean that repentance does not bear social fruits; it does mean that repentance practiced for the sake of such fruits is a bad kind of magic'.<sup>33</sup>

Miller is quick to observe that Niebuhr's attempt to avoid such bad magic does not intend to mitigate ethical scrutiny.<sup>34</sup> He helps readers to see that Niebuhr's goal 'is not to address directly the ethics of war, but to outflank prior approaches by providing an alternative image'.<sup>35</sup> Yet, the outflanking Niebuhr seeks is stunted by the fact that his 'insistence on contrition is not followed by a clear set of directives'.<sup>36</sup> His call for repentance lacks a corresponding account of what to do once we have left the altar – it 'threatens to undermine any ethical approach to war, leaving Christians in the limbo of quietism'.<sup>37</sup> More simply put, Niebuhr offers no

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. For instance, he observes that 'man's task is not that of building Utopias but that of eliminating weeds and tilling the soil so that the kingdom of God can grow. His method is not one of striving for perfection or of acting perfectly, but of clearing the road by repentance and forgiveness'. H. Richard Niebuhr, 'The Only Way into the Kingdom of God', *The Christian Century* 49 (1932): 447.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, 'Utilitarian Christianity', *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no. 12 (1946): 4-5.

<sup>34</sup> Niebuhr says that 'the cross does not encourage moral indifference; it requires men to take their moral decisions with greater rather than less seriousness'. 'War as Crucifixion', 514. See also 'The Only Way', 447.

<sup>35</sup> Miller, *Interpretations*, 127. As Niebuhr says, 'radical repentance, though it is not designed to be socially relevant, may have social consequences'. 'Utilitarian Christianity', 5.

<sup>36</sup> Miller, *Interpretations*, 139.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 127. Contrition may provide 'the path to self-criticism', but he omits an account of the movement from self-criticism to the social good (133).

specific ethical instruction for Christian participation in or abstention from war.

Repentance is the determinative motif for a Christian response to war but it lacks a constructive political ethic.

### **2.3 Niebuhr's Theme of Repentance in Theological Perspective**

Before turning to Ramsey's appropriation and adaptation of the themes in Niebuhr's war articles, it may prove helpful to frame our interpretive gains thus far by introducing a reference to the role of repentance in the Christian theological tradition. That is to say, if both Niebuhr and Ramsey incorporate the theme into their political writings, taking stock of a functional account of repentance in the Christian life may supply an interpretively significant point of comparison.

There is, however, a certain risk of appearing arbitrary or leading with the introduction of such a point of reference. Ramsey himself rules out the possibility of turning to a dictionary. In response to an audacious and biting letter from the student secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation who offered Webster's definition of pacifism as something to which he might be more attentive, Ramsey replied, 'I know of no area of human endeavor and intellectual reflection in which dictionary definitions are sufficient, or exact enough to be illuminating or useful'.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, it would be difficult at this juncture to draw too heavily upon the ecclesiological or liturgical traditions of either thinker.

I suggest instead that we turn to Martin Luther. As a seminal Protestant reformer and a thinker with clear theological influences on both Niebuhr and Ramsey, his description of the meaning of repentance in 'Explanations of the Ninety-

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<sup>38</sup> Paul Ramsey to Brewster Keen, December 7, 1961, Box 14, Ramsey Papers.

Five Theses' is sufficiently normative to justify use here.<sup>39</sup> We need not have certain knowledge that either thinker was familiar with this text to use it pragmatically as a device for drawing out the differences between their understandings of repentance.

Luther observes that Christ 'willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance'.<sup>40</sup> Following upon this claim there are two passages worth examining.

First, he observes that

I shall prove the thesis for the sake of those who are uninformed, first from the Greek word *metanoieite* itself, which means 'repent' and could be translated more exactly by the Latin *transmentamini*, which means 'assume another mind and feeling, recover one's senses, make a transition from one state of mind to another, have a change of spirit'; so that those who hitherto have been aware of earthly matters may now know the spiritual.<sup>41</sup>

Later he says,

And then there is John the Baptist, who was sent according to the plan and decree of God for the purpose of preaching repentance. He also said 'Repent' [Matt 3:2], and again, 'Bear fruits that befit repentance' [Luke 3:8]. John himself explained these words; for after the crowd had asked him what they should do, he answered, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise" [Luke 3:11]. Do you not see that he imposes no penance except that of observing the commands of God, and that he therefore desires that penance be understood as nothing except conversion and the change to a new life? But this is seen even more clearly in the passage where the tax collectors came to him and said, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' And he said, 'Nothing more than you have been commanded to do' [Cf. Luke 3:12-13]. ... Has he in any way imposed anything here other than the ordinary commands of God?<sup>42</sup>

We see in these two passages, on the one hand, a turning away from sin by way of a new spirit and a change of mind. This involves a transition from the earthly to the spiritual. At the same time, Luther reinforces repentance as something that draws us

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<sup>39</sup> Martin Luther, 'Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses', in *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm and trans. Carl W. Folkemer (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 77-252. For commentary on Luther's influence on Ramsey see Michael C. McKenzie, *Paul Ramsey's Ethics: The Power of 'Agape' in a Postmodern World* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 15-17, 49-53.

<sup>40</sup> Luther, 'Explanations', 83.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 96.

into service of the neighbor. There is a sense in which repentance involves physical renewal in the form of being obedient to the commands of God.

While we will have to postpone our evaluation of Ramsey, Miller's commentary on Niebuhr reveals his emphasis on the aspects of repentance characterized by a turn from the earthly to the spiritual. He says that repentance, 'may lead to that situation in which men are able to think the new thoughts which the crisis of the times requires and which they cannot think so long as they remain bound by the passion of this-worldliness.'<sup>43</sup> His chief description of repentance is 'a complete change of mind'.<sup>44</sup> He occasionally speaks of sorrow as an inadequate description of the whole character of repentance, and on one occasion reprimands 'emotional debauches in the feeling of guilt'.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, his use of contrition synonymously with repentance and his insistence that it is the path to self-analysis sustains an emphasis on repentance as an affective response to sin.

Further, as mentioned above, he fails to articulate the shape of right action in the context of repentance. Niebuhr lacks an account of the sort of concrete demands reflected in John the Baptist's order to share our clothing and food with those in need. Thus, his hesitation to prescribe ethical norms leaves somewhat bare his account of repentance as obedience to the commands of God. In light of Luther's descriptions it becomes clear that repentance for Niebuhr functions more as a recognition of sin than as concrete account of the new fruits that are born out of contrition. With this basic observation in place, it is necessary now to turn from Niebuhr to Ramsey's account of politics as deferred repentance and consider how it inherits and redirects these Niebuhrian themes.

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<sup>43</sup> Niebuhr, 'Utilitarian Christianity', 5.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Niebuhr, 'The Grace of Doing Nothing', 379.



## 2.4 Ramsey's Appropriation of Niebuhr's Repentance Motif

A legitimate question may arise in the reader's mind at this point concerning the argument of this chapter. Given my aim to demonstrate Ramsey's inheritance of repentance as a political theme from Niebuhr, is there evidence that he actually read the war articles? A few words about their relationship and his interaction with Niebuhr's political writings are appropriate.

'The Grace of Doing Nothing', appeared in 1932, just after Niebuhr began teaching at Yale. Ramsey arrived at Yale in 1935 to pursue a Bachelor of Divinity after completing his B.A. at Millsaps College in Mississippi. He suspended his studies and returned to Millsaps to be an instructor of history and social science for two years from 1937-1939, but he eventually returned to Yale and completed his degree in 1940. He then began studying for his Ph.D. under Niebuhr's supervision.

The forties were hard on Niebuhr. While he was treating issues of war as late as 1946 in 'Utilitarian Christianity', the topic was clearly exhausting for him. Under the chairmanship of Robert Lowry Calhoun, the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America commissioned a study on the church during wartime and Niebuhr was asked to address the theological dimensions of the issue. The report bears his imprint, but he had to withdraw from the commission before its completion and eventually checked himself into the hospital for treatment of depression.<sup>46</sup> As for Ramsey, he was awarded a post at Garrett Biblical Institute in Evanston, Illinois in 1942 and received his Ph.D. from Yale in 1943. In Fall of 1944, after two years at

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<sup>46</sup> See William Stacy Johnson, Introduction to *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, by H. Richard Niebuhr, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), xvii. For the Calhoun Report, see Richard B. Miller, ed. *War in the Twentieth Century: Sources in Theological Ethics*, Library of Theological Ethics (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

Garrett, he accepted a position at Princeton University and remained in the Department of Religion there until his retirement in 1982.

During the years of the war articles both men remained in close contact. Ramsey enrolled in and audited several courses with Niebuhr during his time at Yale and they corresponded while he was away. It is curious, then, that late in his career when conducting an interview with Ken Vaux for a conference recognizing his contributions to the field of medical ethics, Ramsey remarks,

Well, of the two Niebuhrs, Richard was the theologian. He had very little of the developed public philosophy of his brother Reinhold, who struggled with pacifism and the war. In fact, when I edited the Festschrift for H. Richard Niebuhr entitled *Faith and Ethics*, I came upon the only public exchange between him and his brother, which was in the *Christian Century*, in which the essence of Richard's reply to Reinhold is captured in the title: 'The Grace To Do Nothing'.<sup>47</sup>

Here Ramsey indicates that he did not encounter *The Christian Century* exchange while studying at Yale and seems to exhibit a lack of awareness of Richard's own struggle with pacifism and war. At the same time, he edited *Faith and Ethics* several years before penning his first use of deferred repentance in *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, later in the same interview he adds, 'with specific regard to the war, for [H. Richard] Niebuhr, responding to the enemy was responding to the judgment of God. In historical events such as the war, we were to respond to God as creator, judge and redeemer'.<sup>49</sup> Here is a clear indication of familiarity with one of the distinctive themes of the articles: war as the judgment of God.

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<sup>47</sup> Kenneth L. Vaux, Sara Vaux, and Mark Stenberg, eds., *Covenants of Life: Contemporary Medical Ethics in Light of the Thought of Paul Ramsey*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 247. Ramsey, of course, slightly misquotes the title of Niebuhr's article, 'The Grace of Doing Nothing'. See also Paul Ramsey, ed., *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957).

<sup>48</sup> *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* (New York: Association Press, 1961), 116.

<sup>49</sup> Vaux, et. al., eds., *Covenants*, 248.

In a letter from 1976 to a young graduate student preparing his masters dissertation on scripture in Ramsey's ethics, he reflects on how he 'came to see the fitness of Christian non-pacifism' in the mid 1940s.<sup>50</sup> He says,

Two things were at work, I suppose, or happened to me. One was my gradual growth out of Millsaps liberalism into a more orthodox theological outlook at Yale – where the influence of the Niebuhrs had its steady effect long before any change of position on my part. The second was the 'culture shock' of going to teach for two years at Garrett where I found myself in the midst of a hotbed of that same Methodist liberal-pacifist background of mine. That accomplished the overturning of my position, more than when I was defending it at Yale.<sup>51</sup>

Here he speaks of an influence of both Niebuhrs on his transition away from pacifism. Somewhat against the earlier comment indicating that he was late in finding *The Christian Century* exchange, Ramsey also notes in the letter that he was influenced by Reinhold's introduction of *Christianity and Crisis* as a response to *The Christian Century*. Both journals contain articles from H. Richard addressing topics of war and politics.

The final piece of evidence is perhaps the most persuasive, and it certainly arrives closest to a glimpse at Ramsey's interaction with Niebuhr during the years when the war articles were composed. Contained in the Paul Ramsey Papers are a series of notes, undated, from a course with Niebuhr on Christian ethics.<sup>52</sup> They are a fascinating glimpse into Ramsey's scholarly youth; notes on war and politics reflect his tumultuous transition from an ardent pacifist in the late thirties and early forties

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<sup>50</sup> See Paul Ramsey to Sid Macaulay, March 20, 1976, Box 16, Ramsey Papers. I have been unable to obtain access to Sidney S. Macaulay, 'The Use of Scripture in the Ethics of Paul Ramsey', M.Th. diss., Columbia Theological Seminary, 1976. For a glimpse into his early pacifism see Paul Ramsey, 'Christianity and War', *Christian Advocate* 110, no. 4 (1935): 202-203.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. He continues, 'You can say that Chap. V of Basic Christian Ethics sets down in writing the voyage by which I came to see the fitness of a Christian non-pacifism. Some have said that there I am too hard on the pacifist. If so, I was coming down hard on a position I formerly held'.

<sup>52</sup> Paul Ramsey, lecture notes on Principles of Christian Ethics, Box 35, Ramsey Papers.

to an equally ardent just-war advocate in 1944 and beyond.<sup>53</sup> They are riddled with question marks (and other signs of interpretive angst) in the margins. Included in these lecture notes are discussions of pacifism, just-war and conscientious objection viewed through the traditionally Niebuhrian ethic of response, observations on the structure of the political moment and comments insisting that the judgment of God subjects politics to the same moral criteria as the individual (one highlight of politics as deferred repentance).

Most importantly for the purposes of this argument, however, are notes reflecting themes in the war articles: attention to the coercive limitations of the political realm, insistence that ‘restraint must be mated with (1) love and (2) repentance, all this done with hope (3) (response to redemption)’ and explicit reference to the moral relativism that stems from the cross on Calvary.<sup>54</sup> These notes, when taken in conjunction with his discovery of the *Christian Century* exchange in the 1950s, give me adequate reason to believe that Ramsey was shaped by the themes driving the war articles. Whether or not he consulted the published versions in the preparation of *War and the Christian Conscience* and *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, he clearly engaged with similar themes and motifs in the years leading up to those works.

#### **2.4.1 Four Points of Congruence between Niebuhr and Ramsey**

I want now to suggest four ways that the account of deferred repentance appropriates Niebuhr’s use of repentance as the determinative motif for a Christian

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<sup>53</sup> For extended commentary on his transition from pacifism to the realism of the just war tradition see Long, *Tragedy*, 5-42 and David Attwood, *Paul Ramsey’s Political Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 1992), 11-12.

<sup>54</sup> Ramsey, lecture notes on Principles of Christian Ethics.

response to war. Each is premised by the basic claim in 'War as the Judgment of God' that 'it is impossible so to separate response to the judgment of God from politically necessary action as to make religious life an affair of repentance while political action remains essentially unrepentant'.<sup>55</sup> This refusal to exclude the judgment of God from any area of life yields a concern for a concept of political repentance that funds the following four points.

1. *The task of political ethics is to illuminate the context of political decision-making, not to assume responsibility for supplying specific directives for each particular political decision.*

Niebuhr's sensitivity to the ambiguity of moral judgments leads him to emphasize the significance of the context of political actions. He says, 'a single action ... derives significance only from the context in which it stands; and the context which carries the action along, which makes it part of a total pattern, is determined by religion'.<sup>56</sup> The entry-point for theological contributions to ethics is via the maintenance of proper context for moral action. He says, 'religion enters into every specific action but does not determine the rough material of the action ... Religious interest is directed more toward preceding and succeeding acts than toward

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<sup>55</sup> Niebuhr, 'War as the Judgment', 631-632.

<sup>56</sup> Niebuhr, 'The Christian Church', 11. As Werpehowski notes, the war articles 'direct the moral agent behind and ahead of the specific action, to an assessment of the preceding and anticipated succeeding acts by the agent and others. The acts come together to form a wider context for reflection on the moral life'. *American Protestant Ethics*, 28.

the particular act of the moment'.<sup>57</sup> This leads him away from specific moral directives.

This emphasis appears in two principal forms in his discussion of repentance. First, he uses repentance as a force for galvanizing the individual self for right action. 'Repentance enables one to act as a single, integrated agent, one who holds together a plurality of roles and perspectives in a coherent unity'.<sup>58</sup> This highlights the importance of individual conscience and volition in political decision-making while retaining an integral role for the church in urging repentance and sustaining the appropriate moral context. Second, his emphasis on context over action produces hesitancy in making specific moral judgments or prescriptive ethical recommendations. He concludes 'War as the Judgment of God' by saying, 'these are but general reflections which do not presume to say to anyone what his particular duty in response to God's judgment must be. They seek however to describe in what spirit and context Christians in varying vocations ... may meet the divine judgment and maintain fellowship with each other'.<sup>59</sup> Thus an abstention from specific political recommendations stems from an ecumenical impulse and attention to the significance of divine judgment.

Ramsey inherits Niebuhr's sensitivity to the ambiguity of moral judgments – his disagreement with David Little was precisely an attempt to pinpoint its effects on political morality. He translates this into an emphasis on the proper role of political decision-making. Here a quote which closely resembles his account of deferred

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<sup>57</sup> Niebuhr, 'The Christian Church', 11-12. Later in this article he attempts to explain the relationship between an act and its context with a metaphor of that between a word and a sentence. He says, 'Apart from the question of the rare, excluded act, it is evident that an act placed in a particular context is molded and given distinctive form, even as a word in a sentence is subject – according to its position – to variations of case, tense, mood, inflection, accent'. (13) See also Werpehowski, *American Protestant Ethics*, 68.

<sup>58</sup> Miller, *Interpretations*, 139-140.

<sup>59</sup> Niebuhr 'War as the Judgment', 633.

repentance will help demonstrate the similarities with Niebuhr. In 'Turn Toward Just War' he says,

It ought to be impossible for Christians to suppose that the political life of mankind is anything other than a realm of 'patient endurance' ... This puts politics in its place, and frees men for clear-sighted participation in it. ... Then politics can be best conducted; decision and action can be what they are worth. This only *de-mythologizes* the role of politics, and men are free to think of it as highly as they ought to think, and not make unearthly demands of it.<sup>60</sup>

While it may seem strange that I am linking his call to de-mythologize politics with Niebuhr's attempt to re-poeticize war, their shared perspective on the contextual character of moral agency drives a similar attention to the need for new language to describe purposive political action.

Ramsey also inherits Niebuhr's reticence to issue specific political directives. As Joseph Allen notes, he understands his task as an advocate of political realism to be 'primarily an effort to perceive those characteristics always and everywhere present in politics, including possibilities for good and for evil'.<sup>61</sup> As he says in *War and the Christian Conscience*, 'the important thing is to make clear and keep clear in the public conscience the moral *context* of political action that should surround every specific political decision and should be the aim of political practice'.<sup>62</sup> While I will deal with his interpretation of the church's relationship with the magistrate in chapter six, it is sufficient to note here that he, like Niebuhr, discourages the church from usurping the proper office of political authority with moral instructions for specific action.

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<sup>60</sup> Paul Ramsey, 'Turn Toward Just War', *Worldview* 5, no. 7-8 (1968): 8-9.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph L. Allen, 'The Discriminating Realism of Paul Ramsey', *Worldview* 12, no. 12 (1969): 14.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961), 12. Ramsey, along these lines, elsewhere calls for Christian leaders to 'repress their penchant for exercises in day-by-day political decision-making'. Paul Ramsey, 'Politics as Science, Not Prophecy', *Worldview* 11, no. 1 (1968): 19.

2. *Working for good in the political realm may require patience or calculated inactivity.*

Niebuhr's stance in 'The Grace of Doing Nothing' brought heavy criticism from those (including his brother) who thought he was advocating an escapist Christian political ethic. Consider, though, these comments:

An inactivity then is demanded which will be profoundly active in rigid self analysis. Such analysis is likely to reveal that there is an approach to the situation, indirect but far more effective than direct interference, for it is able to create the conditions under which a real reconstruction of habits is possible. It is the opposite approach from that of the irate father who believes that every false reaction on the part of his child may be cured by a verbal, physical or economic spanking.<sup>63</sup>

Niebuhr doesn't rule out the possibility of direct political action in the form of a "verbal, physical or economic spanking". Rather, he believes that calculated inactivity can "create conditions" for calculated activity. This demonstrates that his understanding of "inactivity" in 'The Grace of Doing Nothing' is not permanent but prepared and calculated. His position might equally be expressed as 'The Grace of Doing Nothing, Yet'. Political action must be encased in a posture of restraint, purposeful inactivity and self-analysis.

Ramsey's emphasis on negotiation as the hallmark of deferred repentance mirrors this approach to political action. The "not forever" on the end of deferred repentance is the implicit "yet" on the end of the grace of doing nothing. The pursuit of the political good requires constant negotiation and renegotiation of personal and collective motives through self-analysis and restraint from a constant rush to hasty

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<sup>63</sup> Niebuhr, 'The Grace of Doing Nothing', 379.



and uncalculated political action. He is as wary of the “irate father” approach to political ethics as his teacher is.

Ramsey absorbs Niebuhr’s pursuit of a political ethic that is ‘able to create the conditions under which a real reconstruction of habits is possible’.<sup>64</sup> In the discussion of deferred repentance he observes that ‘just conduct must often first be made possible by prior acts, and by the patient play of moral reflection upon actual political conventions’.<sup>65</sup> This impulse also came into view in the discussion of how long the U.S. could continue its inactive stance toward apartheid South Africa in *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*.<sup>66</sup> Both thinkers locate a unique place for calculated patience in Christian political ethics.

3. *The politician works for good in a broken system because practices in war must be reformed just as the individual self must be reformed.*

Both thinkers also connect the reformation of political structures with the reformation of the self because of the inability to permanently separate public and private morality. Niebuhr rejects as wholly unacceptable the construction of ‘a twofold set of actions for the individual: repentance toward the infinite, and self confidence in the realm of finite, concrete action’.<sup>67</sup> This creates the possibility of moral goodness in the political realm – ‘Nothing is regarded as beyond the scope of redemption – not the political life of men, nor the economic, nor the spiritual’.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. Niebuhr notes that the ‘real reconstruction’ of politics is what ‘the old Christians called repentance’ (379).

<sup>65</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 309.

<sup>66</sup> Ramsey, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, 116.

<sup>67</sup> Miller, *Interpretations*, 134.

<sup>68</sup> Niebuhr, ‘War as the Judgment’, 632.

As early as his lecture notes from Niebuhr's ethics course Ramsey had in mind that 'as with the individual, so with the state'.<sup>69</sup> He bases his theory of deferred repentance on the claim that there is 'not an essential difference between private morality and public morality' and adopts James Dougherty's observation that 'persons and states are subjected to the same fundamental code of justice'.<sup>70</sup> Niebuhr observes that, 'it is the duty of the church to show Pilate how to be just, and malefactors how to be repentant in the presence of Jesus'.<sup>71</sup> Here Niebuhr links just rulings of political officials with the repentance of malefactors of their sin. Ramsey's account of deferred repentance makes this connection explicit by calling those just rulings political repentance.

*4. All political judgments are under the judgment of God – they are the prelude to a greater judgment and a new era.*

Niebuhr observes at the outset of World War II that 'the history of the world is the judgment of the world and also its redemption, and such a conflict as the present one is ... only the prelude both to greater judgment and to a new era'.<sup>72</sup> Both Ramsey and Niebuhr reinforce this idea that the final redemption lies beyond, rather than on this side of political judgments. Ramsey's frequent reminders that political endeavors take place on this side of the eschatological kingdom of God is a reminder not to mistakenly assume that the final judgment and new era have already arrived.

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<sup>69</sup> Ramsey, lecture notes on Principles of Christian Ethics.

<sup>70</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 11, 310. Thus, magistrates 'guide the thrust of political action into ways that are right' (12).

<sup>71</sup> Niebuhr, 'The Christian Church', 16.

<sup>72</sup> Niebuhr, 'The Grace of Doing Nothing', 379.

One principal consequence of locating political conflicts under the judgment of God is that, as Niebuhr says, war ‘cannot be interpreted as hell; if it were hell we could not even be aware that God is judging us for we would be without God in war’.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, ‘if God were not in the war ... it would mean that the cosmos had no concern with justice’.<sup>74</sup> Ramsey adopts a similar posture by arguing that war cannot be hell and must be governed by moral norms of justice. He does not, however, appropriate Niebuhr’s description of God as “in” the war. I will say more about this later. For now it is important to take note of the way deferred repentance is rooted in the Niebuhrian insistence that political judgments are a prelude to a greater judgment and a new era in the kingdom of God.

## **2.5 Reflections on the Legacy of the War Articles in Ramsey’s Political**

### **Theology**

At this point the extent to which Ramsey’s concept of deferred repentance draws upon and extends Niebuhr’s use of repentance as the determinative motif for a Christian response to war should be clear. What appears to be an obscure and disconnected concept in *War and the Christian Conscience* receives more theological and structural shape in light of the arguments in the war articles. The final task of this chapter, then, is to consider the extent to which Ramsey takes the political significance of the concept of repentance in a new theological direction. Here the title of this chapter – ‘From Contrition to Action’ – comes squarely into view.

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<sup>73</sup> Niebuhr, ‘War as the Judgment’, 631.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 633.

Ramsey does not appropriate wholesale Niebuhr's concept of repentance. For instance, he abandons the account of God's action in war.<sup>75</sup> He also lacks the strong Niebuhrian sense that, as Miller notes, 'God is present in the secondary causes of nature and history'.<sup>76</sup> It may prove helpful, then, to compare Niebuhr and Ramsey on the matter of repentance by turning back to the comments from Luther's 'Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses' introduced earlier. How does Ramsey's account of deferred repentance fit with Luther's theological description?

The most immediate discordance is his overwhelming lack of emphasis on repentance as an act of piety or spirituality. He corrects—perhaps, overcorrects—Niebuhr's insufficient emphasis on right action as a hallmark of repentance by leaving behind the role of contrition. For this reason, William Werpehowski notes that 'Niebuhr's "permanent revolution of the mind and of the heart" may also have a more critical edge than Ramsey's position includes'.<sup>77</sup> Deferred repentance lacks direct reference to God or to a turn from the earthly to the spiritual. It therein omits what Luther describes as a new spirit and a change of mind.

The avoidance of such language is a common theme in Ramsey's political writings. His distaste for the emotional swell of political protests is one example of an insensitivity to this more affective side of the repentant political self. He is wary of overly emotional responses to sin for their ability to overwhelm careful moral

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<sup>75</sup> See, for instance, Niebuhr's claim that 'it is a healthy sign that Christians of all groups are giving increasing attention to the question of God's action in war'. Ibid., 630. Ramsey also avoids such explicit statements as, 'But God, I believe, is always in history; he is the structure in things, the source of all meaning, the "I am that I am," that which is that it is'. Niebuhr, 'The Only Way', 447.

<sup>76</sup> Miller, *Interpretations*, 134.

<sup>77</sup> Werpehowski, *American Protestant Ethics*, 12.

distinctions. For this reason he speaks very rarely about emotions associated with repentance – his soldier is not one who ‘blubbers over his gunpowder’.<sup>78</sup>

His tendency to avoid the language of contrition comes more clearly into view in his chapter on guilt in *Nine Modern Moralists*. He offers there two comments worth quoting at length. First, he describes guilt, saying,

Guilt is what the gospel lives by disabusing; where the word of God speaks, guilt can have no standing. ‘Where God speaks man must be present without considering his own merit’ (Barth); where God speaks, man must be present without considering his own guilt or demerit. ... In the strict sense there is also no knowledge of guilt except in the light of Christ’s cross. For he alone understands what guilt is who knows that his guilt is forgiven him.<sup>79</sup>

Later he extends and formalizes this description, saying,

From the point of view of forgiveness, what, then, is guilt? ... (1) Guilt is a forensic term for the difficulty of repentance; (2) guilt is a forensic term for unwillingness to receive forgiveness; (3) guilt is a forensic term for continuation in sin in the teeth of proffered forgiveness; (4) guilt is a forensic term for despair over sin and for despairing of the forgiveness of sin.<sup>80</sup>

The juxtaposition of repentance with guilt, as well as the notion that guilt is marked by the continuation of sin demonstrates his preference for a theological account of repentance marked by constructive action. Just as the Gospel disabuses guilt, so also does it foster faithful obedience in the form of right action.

In this light his account reflects Luther’s description of repentance as something which draws us into service of the neighbor. It is a kind of political outworking of the explanation given in Luke 3: ‘He who has two coats, let him share

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<sup>78</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950), 188.

<sup>79</sup> Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists*, 38-39.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 39. He takes the fact that he is only willing to consider something called guilt in light of a prior (Christological) concept called forgiveness to be emblematic of a properly Christian description. He notes, ‘If what follows in this chapter appears to be like the case of the student who named the kings of Israel when asked on a Bible examination to compare the major and minor prophets, that is exactly as it should be. When asked about guilt or other concepts appropriate only to a judicial viewpoint, a Christian should indeed speak of something else’ (39). See also page 46.

with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise'.<sup>81</sup> Deferred repentance as constructive political action involves physical renewal in the form of being obedient to the commands of God – or, in Ramsey's case, the moral principles informed by Christian love that define and govern political conflict.

The moral upshot of this is his insistence that specific principles of justified war can be established as foundations for political morality. He follows his account of deferred repentance with an exploration of the tradition of just war thinking and an explication of discrimination and proportion as the hallmarks of adequate moral reasoning in politics – this is the principal purpose of *War and the Christian Conscience*. The fact that I do not here elaborate on the constructive political ethic put forth – others have written at length on proportion, discrimination, non-combatant immunity, etc. and my purposes here lie elsewhere – should not obscure the fact that his just war norms are explicit articulations of how the political life is to be transformed in accordance with Christian love. Deferred repentance attempts to capture the theological context of such purposive political action upholding those moral norms.

The contrast between both thinkers on the issue of repentance should not obscure the fact that Ramsey's use of the concept as a key theme for a Christian response to war and a Christian account of participation in politics is developed clearly on the foundation of Niebuhrian ideas. Yet, the comparative exercise demonstrates that Ramsey takes a view of political judgment that Niebuhr never could: 'An ethics grounded in justification in Christ has no ... urgent need to avoid making judgments of right and wrong in politics.'<sup>82</sup> Or, as he says in unpublished

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<sup>81</sup> Luther, 'Explanations', 96.

<sup>82</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 13.

notes from early in his career, ‘since the God of the covenant transcends nature and acts in history, man is ... freed for moral decision’.<sup>83</sup> Whereas for Niebuhr repentance is a complete change of mind, for Ramsey it is to ‘guide the thrust of political action into ways that are right’.<sup>84</sup> This is what I have called the movement from contrition to action.

That movement, however, begs an additional set of questions regarding the way in which Ramsey uses repentance to inform and determine the constructive moral and political self. Understanding repentance as constructive political action requires a turn to several lesser-known essays, pieces of correspondence and unpublished materials from the Ramsey Papers where he confronts more directly the significance of repentance. These particular writings illuminate his understanding of the role of the magistrate and his insistence that without knowledge of justice and injustice – that is, without knowledge of the sort of right action demanded of Christians under the judgment of God and awareness of how Christians can fail to act according to standards of justice – repentance remains a hollow concept. The final chapter of this section on repentance in Ramsey’s thought examines these writings in order to understand more fully his theology of repentance as constructive political action.

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<sup>83</sup> Unpublished notes, Box 42, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>84</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 12.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **‘No Tears Please’: Repentance as Constructive Political Action**

More fundamental than sorrow for our past sins is a repentant faith which *in acting* nevertheless *waits* for the Lord to complete by His Divine Providence the goodness of our finite actions, and which still trusts Him when in His Divine Judgment our action is thwarted and rejected.<sup>1</sup>

– Paul Ramsey, ‘The Manger, the Cross, and the Resurrection’

Shortly after the publication of *War and the Christian Conscience* in 1961 Ramsey received a letter from John Hick, then of Princeton Theological Seminary. In that letter Hick takes issue with what he calls ‘the sinister notion of deferred repentance’, saying that it ‘sounds suspiciously as though it simply means not doing what one sees to be right, or doing what one sees to be wrong’.<sup>2</sup> Ramsey’s response is illuminating. He says,

This is not sinister, but is rather of relating moral principles to political action acknowledged to be ‘the art of the possible’ in such fashion as to prevent this ‘art of the possible’ from becoming a realm of either technical performance or power politics wholly unrelated to morality. ‘Deferred repentance’ means primarily, not doing what one sees to be wrong (though this may in some sense still be true) but doing from among the possible collective acts the one that is most right among the possibles and the one best calculated to make more of what is right a possibility for future political choice. It is, therefore, to do the politically right, the best possible good.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘The Manger, the Cross, and the Resurrection’ *Christianity in Crisis* 3, no. 4 (1943): 4.

<sup>2</sup> John Hick to Paul Ramsey, June 27, 1961, Box 11, The Paul Ramsey Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Perkins-Bostock Library, Duke University.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ramsey to John Hick, July 13, 1961, Box 11, Ramsey Papers. Ramsey also says to Hick, ‘Unless you are going to say that there is no difference between the morality of private and of responsible action (I say there is no difference in the principle that pertains), there is no need for some equivalent concept of “deferred repentance”’.



This emphasizes the move from contrition to right political action detailed in the previous chapter. Imbedded in the term “deferred repentance” is a distinct call for purposive movement toward the political good.

His response also calls attention to the belief that the political good cannot simply be one of resignation to evil. That would be to relinquish the possibility of Christian love and faithfulness at work even in the political realm. This is driven by a concern that the logic of choosing between “lesser evils” will erode into a kind of excuse-giving rather than moral justification.<sup>4</sup> His insistence to Hick that deferred repentance involves the selection of the ‘most right among the possibles’ indicates that even if “least possible evil” and “greatest possible good” could be used to describe the same political act, the interpretive difference is of great theological significance. He says this another way late in his career: ‘The least unavoidable evil simply is the greatest possible good; no tears please’.<sup>5</sup>

Ramsey sustains this attention to the greatest possible political good throughout his writings on politics. For instance, he observes in ‘Politics as Science, Not Prophecy’ that the just war theory ‘defines *right* doing that good may come of it, not wrong doing quixotically alleged to be warranted solely by consequences expected to follow’.<sup>6</sup> This refusal to embrace moral evil as a means to desirable political ends helps us to see his principal response to Hick. He aims to provide an interpretation of political action that identifies and encourages a constructive sense of moral purpose even in the limited context of the political realm.

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<sup>4</sup> He says that the phrase ‘I choose the lesser evil’ is ‘more like an excuse than a justification’. Kenneth L. Vaux, Sara Vaux, and Mark Stenberg, eds., *Covenants of Life: Contemporary Medical Ethics in Light of the Thought of Paul Ramsey*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 165.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. He also acknowledges that ‘perhaps in the past I have been too cavalier’ in making this claim.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘Politics as Science, Not Prophecy’, *Worldview* 11, no. 1 (1968): 21. He rejects the view that ‘killing in war is intrinsically wrong, but this immorality may nevertheless be done if the acts of war are calculated to lead to a lesser available evil among the consequences’ (20).

The aim of this chapter is to proceed from his unique and limited account of politics as deferred repentance to wider observations about his theology of repentance and call for constructive political action. This involves a transition away from *War and the Christian Conscience* and *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* into a series of disparate discussions of repentance drawn from throughout his lifetime. I will consult his discussion of guilt and repentance in *Nine Modern Moralists*, as well as a number of letters from his professional correspondence over the issue of the Vietnam War. This will highlight his use of repentance to call attention to the contingent and temporal character of our moral political existence. We begin, however, with his comments on repentance in an early essay published in *Christianity and Crisis*, ‘The Manger, the Cross, and the Resurrection’.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.1 Repentance for Unrighteousness, Repentance for Righteousness

The Paul Ramsey Papers contain a folder titled, ‘Other Publications– the 1940s’.<sup>8</sup> In it are several early essays exploring various Christian theological concepts with a view to their ethical relevance. The titles include ‘The Christian Faith in the Midst of Despair’, ‘A Christian Vocation’, and ‘The Fullness of Time’. One essay, ‘The Indefensibility of Defensive Nations’, has scrawled on its title page ‘Submitted to one of Reinhold Niebuhr’s quarterlies – rejected’. The essay of greatest interest for this discussion is titled ‘Sin, Repentance, and History’. It does not give any indication of having been published and Ramsey’s movement from Yale Divinity School to Garrett Biblical Seminary to Princeton University in the 1940s makes the draft difficult to date.

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<sup>7</sup> Ramsey, ‘The Manger’.

<sup>8</sup> Box 36, Ramsey Papers.

As it turns out, the essay did find its way into print in 1943. D. Stephen Long tells the story of Reinhold Niebuhr supplying the title for an essay published as ‘The Manger, the Cross and the Resurrection’. That essay is a reworked version of ‘Sin, Repentance, and History’.<sup>9</sup> The significance of the essay for this discussion concerns Ramsey’s suggestion of an important distinction between two forms of repentance. He says, ‘repentance in which we suffer remorse for an action the evil character of which has thrust itself or has somehow been hauled into our consciousness, is clearly different from that repentance which is appropriate for our deeper, unconscious sin’.<sup>10</sup> He calls the first of these ‘repentance for unrighteousness’ and the second ‘repentance for righteousness’.

Contrition is the appropriate character of repentance for unrighteousness because of the delayed nature of the act. He says, ‘Sorrow or remorseful repentance for things we have done in the past, the sinfulness of which we now see, is something which must always be *subsequent* to the sin itself’.<sup>11</sup> He explains this in an essay published the following year, saying, ‘one becomes aware of having sinned against what he knew before the act and knows after the act to be the moral law; and remorseful repentance leading to self-improvement are then in order’.<sup>12</sup> That is, only in looking back can we recognize the wrongdoing in need of repentance.

What Ramsey terms repentance for righteousness, however, is more elusive. He observes, ‘repentance for our unconscious sin, make no mistake about it, is repentance for our righteousness. It is superfluous to say “for our supposed

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<sup>9</sup> D. Stephen Long, *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism: The Ethics of Paul Ramsey* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 95. I will quote from ‘The Manger, the Cross, and the Resurrection’ except where the original version contains unpublished material.

<sup>10</sup> Ramsey, ‘The Manger’, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘Natural Law and the Nature of Man’, *Christendom* 9, no. 3 (1944): 373.

righteousness”, because before God all human righteousness is “supposed” until God has acted and judged’.<sup>13</sup> The concept does not imply that we should repent of the “righteousness” imputed through the judgment and grace of God, but rather that we recognize even in our current pursuit of righteous action the broken character of human agency. He notes, ‘We also sin, not knowing what we do, whenever we act at all; even when, as by a metaphor we say, *we do good*’.<sup>14</sup> That now unchanging aspect of fallen creation, even in the pursuit of good, requires repentance.

Two forms of hubris collapse here under the judgment of God. The first is the presumption that on the basis of our limited human judgments we can identify past sin. The second is the absurdity of trying to relate self-conscious remorse to layers of unconscious sin. He says, ‘before God unrepentant unrighteousness and unrepentant righteousness come to the same thing’.<sup>15</sup> The evidence that they ‘are judged alike by God’ is that ‘in history they come in time to the same thing, namely, cruelty’.<sup>16</sup> Here Ramsey calls to mind H.R. Niebuhr’s emphasis on the suffering of the innocent as the principal result of war. He continues the Niebuhrian theme, saying, ‘this is the Cross in History from which also, in the light of the Cross of Christ, we learn that man’s deepest sin lies in an unrepentant righteousness that knows not the sin for which it is responsible’.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ramsey, ‘The Manger’, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 4. Ramsey observes similarly in 1962 that ‘the Reformers’ doctrine of the sinfulness or so-called total depravity of human nature was simply not set in juxtaposition to the requirements of natural morality but rather in contrast to the demand that a Christian man become a Christ to his neighbor. From this absolute norm – surely a more Christian norm – it follows as the night that all have sinned and sinned rather “totally”. At least it is “not easy” to find men who have not fallen short, and repeatedly in every moment continue to fall short, of the glory of God as Christians understand him in Christ’. *Nine Modern Moralists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 37-38.

<sup>15</sup> Ramsey, ‘The Manger’, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Ramsey also speaks of the action of God in history and human action in light of the judgment of God. The presence of these themes only further reinforces my claim in the previous chapter that he develops the political theme of repentance out of interaction with concepts from the work of H. R. Niebuhr.

The question that emerges from this is how Christians are to ‘repent for the unconscious sin of our righteousness’.<sup>18</sup> He says, ‘repentance for ... the unconscious sin of each moment for which we are nevertheless responsible is something which must necessarily be *simultaneous* with the act’.<sup>19</sup> The unavoidable simultaneity of our responsibility for repentance and our continual sinfulness renders contrition an impractical and somewhat inappropriate response. The troublesome nature of repentance for righteousness is revealed by the unintelligibility of ‘trying to be sickly sorrowful for what we are now doing’.<sup>20</sup> Contrition is an appropriate moral response only when subsequent to sin (and never contemporary with it).

Ramsey lingers on this issue because of his anxiety over the potentially crippling effect repentance of that sort would have on the pursuit of the good. He says, ‘we cannot remorsefully repent and put away from us *all* our sins, because this would mean ceasing to do what we are *now doing*’.<sup>21</sup> Contrition ‘is impossible with regard to all our actions, save by an act of renouncing life which is itself an act of life’.<sup>22</sup> Any attempt to emphasize contrition as the principal response to the continually broken character of all human endeavors – even those involving determinations of right – drives him to say of these forms of repentance,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 4. One “Writings and Speeches” folder in the Ramsey Papers contains a response to a now lost paper by “Professor Edwards” at Wesley Theological Seminary. The paper contains no surname or area of research for the professor and I have not been able to identify his or her full name. Nonetheless, Ramsey expresses in his response a similar sentiment (albeit slightly tongue-in-cheek) about sinfulness and the need for the pursuit of right action, saying, ‘Even those who would say that in our life together we are all ambiguous, obdurate sinners, still say, that the trick is to pick out the best sin and commit it’. Unpublished paper responding to Professor Edwards, Box 42, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>22</sup> Ramsey, ‘The Manger’, 4.

‘ludicrous results and theoretical confusion always follow from any attempt to mix the two’.<sup>23</sup>

His theological perspective becomes clearer in light of the reflections on guilt and repentance in the chapter titled ‘God’s Grace and Man’s Guilt’ in *Nine Modern Moralists*.<sup>24</sup> He explains in this essay that ‘we sin, and while we may be simply aware of that fact ... we are also aware of ourselves as sinners and objectify ourselves as such’.<sup>25</sup> The tendency to objectify ourselves as sinners – that is, to despair over the fact that we ‘repeatedly every moment continue to fall short’ – causes ‘the difficulty of repentance’.<sup>26</sup> This speaks to the way repentance in the form of contrition is susceptible to a kind of hubris which overwhelms its proper role in the Christian life.

Repentance is thus constantly undercut by a tendency to objectify sinfulness through guilt and despair. He continues the description of this difficulty, saying,

The myriad multiplication of selves in self-awareness also makes difficult an integral act of true repentance. Even in the face of proffered forgiveness, like Augustine we are always ‘willing and nilling’ the same good at the same time; we will nothing wholly or entirely; we are in this sense unwilling to be forgiven. We will our sin and our forgiveness at one and the same moment; we will the forgiveness we would and we will the sin we would not’.<sup>27</sup>

I mentioned in the previous chapter that he believes guilt can only be properly grasped in light of the Cross of Christ, or, in light of forgiveness. Here he expands

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>24</sup> Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists*, 35-56. The essay was first printed as ‘God’s Grace and Man’s Guilt’, *Journal of Religion* 31, no. 1 (1951): 21-37. For a more systematic treatment of Ramsey and Dostoevsky see Scott Davis, “‘Et Quod Vis Fac’: Paul Ramsey and Augustinian Ethics”, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 19, no. 2 (1991): 39-50.

<sup>25</sup> Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists*, 40. He adds, later, ‘The person who despairs over sin makes even confession and repentance itself an occasion for “sinking still deeper”’ (48).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 37, 40.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 43. It is not simply the layers of awareness of sinfulness which produce ‘endless and often puzzling convolutions of personal consciousness’. He also observes that ‘We perceive, and are aware of ourselves perceiving. ... We think, and we know ourselves in the course of thinking. ... We do good deeds, and, while we may be simply aware of that fact, we are also aware of ourselves as doers of good deeds’ (40).

that concept by arguing that our inability to understand repentance, sin and forgiveness stems from the fact that self-consciousness gets in the way.

### 3.1.1 A Turn toward Politics

In ‘The Manger, the Cross, and the Resurrection’ his warning against self indulgent despair takes the discussion in a distinctly political direction. His principal example of one who avoids the inappropriate confusion of the two forms of repentance is the Christian soldier. If repentance for unrighteousness is the only kind of repentance – that is, if contrition is the only response to sin – he observes, ‘then Charles Clayton Morrison is right in saying that we cannot be repentant for what we are doing in wartime, but only for our part in the prior actions and failures that led to war’.<sup>28</sup> Ramsey, unlike Morrison, wants to sustain an idea of repentance in war. He does this by pointing to the Christian soldier who ‘repentantly fights the just war’ but ‘is not one who is always blubbing over his gunpowder!’<sup>29</sup>

He later describes this permanent attitude characteristic of repentance for righteousness in war with what I take to be the most illuminating line of the article. He observes, ‘more fundamental than sorrow for our past sins is a repentant faith which *in acting* nevertheless *waits* for the Lord to complete by His Divine Providence the goodness of our finite actions, and which still trusts Him when in His Divine Judgment our action is thwarted and rejected’.<sup>30</sup> He italicizes *in acting*

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<sup>28</sup> Ramsey, ‘The Manger’, 3. This is a consequence of contrition being a necessarily “subsequent” response to sin.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 4. The soldier is one ‘whose permanent attitude of life is directed, not toward the righteousness of his act as itself sufficient to justify him, nor toward the unrighteousness of his act as sufficient to condemn him, but toward God, the author and finisher of his faith’ (4).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Eric Gregory presents what I take to be essentially the same idea when interpreting Ramsey’s Augustinianism in *Basic Christian Ethics*, saying, ‘Obedient neighbor-love, rather than mystical God-love, was Ramsey’s central category for Christian ethics ... It is fundamental to his effort to develop

precisely because he considers the primary response to unconscious sin to be the steadfast and trusting ‘judgment about what is good’, however ‘infected by our sinful righteousness’ that judgment may be.<sup>31</sup> For the magistrate this means repentance is to act decisively in political judgment.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, ‘an ethics grounded in justification in Christ has no urgent need to avoid making judgments of right and wrong in politics’.<sup>32</sup> That is not to say such judgments transcend their “infected” character. As he says elsewhere, ‘since value judgments are always the judgments of men who are also sinful, no ... ethic can ever be complete’.<sup>33</sup> It does, however, recognize that God’s transcendence places political judgments under a greater judgment and therein sustains them as moral acts. Ramsey’s theology of repentance funds a call for political action in the form of judgments on what is good and right. They constitute faithful response in knowledge that ‘waits for the Lord to complete by His Divine Providence the goodness of our finite actions’.<sup>34</sup>

Two elements of the previous discussion come back into view at this point. The first is my discussion of Ramsey’s doctoral writings on the philosophy of “absolute idealism” at the beginning of chapter one. His emphasis on the significance of human judgments is a political and theological reinterpretation of the earlier claim

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a prophetic justice transformed by *agape*. *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 181.

<sup>31</sup> Ramsey, ‘The Manger’, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961), 13. This is, as he says in 1972, because ‘political decision and action is in the *image of God*, who also rules by particular decrees’. Paul Ramsey, ‘Force and Political Responsibility’, in *Ethics and World Politics: Four Perspectives*, ed., Ernest W. Lefever (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 47.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘A Theory of Virtue According to the Principles of the Reformation’, *Journal of Religion* 27, no. 3 (1947): 180.

<sup>34</sup> Ramsey, ‘The Manger’, 4.



that ‘only finites are pursued directly’ in service to the transcendent “Absolute”.<sup>35</sup>

That philosophical accent on individual agency has given way to the belief that God’s transcendent judgment endows human judgments with their moral character. His theological objection to repentance as perpetual contrition is precisely aimed at sustaining the constructive character of faithfulness in act and the radical dependence of those limited judgments on the divine will of God.

Second, my use of Luther to draw a contrast between Niebuhr and Ramsey in chapter two becomes clear in light of Ramsey’s comments in ‘Natural Law and the Nature of Man’. In this essay, published one year after ‘The Manger, the Cross, and the Resurrection’, he reintroduces the distinction between ‘two kinds of sin, and for each a corresponding type of repentance’.<sup>36</sup> In his description of the second type, instead of using “repentance for righteousness”, he point to Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses. He writes,

Repentance in this case, unlike the former one, cannot be subsequent to the act of sin but must be simultaneous with it; ... Such repentance is that to which Luther referred when he wrote, in the first of his ninety-five Theses; ‘Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ in saying, “Repent ye, etc.” intended that the whole life of believers should be penitence’. This repentance is the orientation of the self away from itself *while* acting, away from both its righteousness and its unrighteousness, from both its idolatries and its idolatrous correction of idolatry, from its goodness and its guilt, from both sloth and pride; and its turning toward the God of the Gospel that by faith alone, in grace alone, are we saved. Such repentance is indistinguishable from faith.<sup>37</sup>

He again reinforces the theological significance of repentant faith taking shape in act.

Although he does not on this occasion explore the political implications of this

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘The Nature of Man in the Philosophy of Josiah Royce and Bernard Bosanquet’, Box 53, Ramsey Papers, 261.

<sup>36</sup> Ramsey, ‘Natural Law’, 372.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 374.

claim, Luther's definition of repentance is used to fuel the movement from contrition to action in the Christian life.

On the basis of these claims I believe 'The Manger, the Cross, and the Resurrection' offers a unique glimpse into the theological foundations of Ramsey's political thought. He highlights constructive moral action as the faithful response of radically depraved agents to divine judgment. He also supplies a rationale for the significance of political judgments through a theology of repentance. With these foundational perspectives in place I want to face the most pressing debate over political repentance during his lifetime: the Vietnam war.

### **3.2 Ramsey's Understanding of Repentance in the Context of the Vietnam War**

Ramsey was faulted by many critics for his delayed recognition of unjust U.S. military action in the Vietnam conflict. Only later did he admit the error of his judgments, saying that 'I freely grant that in the fury and fog of the verbal wars I failed to keep my agenda for reasoning morally about insurgency and counterinsurgency warfare entirely distinct from my own conviction that we were in Vietnam honourably'.<sup>38</sup> He writes in a letter to Glen Stassen in 1978, 'I judged the war to be proportionate long after I should have changed my mind'.<sup>39</sup>

He was under pressure both to repent of his own judgments on the war and to incorporate a more substantial place for contrition for the ills of war in his political theory. The problem was that he saw no necessary connection between those two demands. Thus, even as he acknowledges to Stassen the wrongness of his judgments he refuses to compromise the truthfulness of the moral norms governing war. He

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<sup>38</sup> See Ramsey's comments in Richard John Neuhaus, *Speaking to the World: Four Protestant Perspectives* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1983), 21.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Ramsey to Glen Stassen, February 14, 1978, Box 26, Ramsey Papers.

writes, ‘If I now went back and changed the political and military theory in order to accomplish repentance, I would be a very poor ethicist indeed’.<sup>40</sup> In order, then, to understand how Ramsey approaches and employs the theme of repentance within the context of the Vietnam war, as well as to understand his response to calls from his critics for contrition, I turn to two significant pieces of correspondence from the 1960s and 70s.

### 3.2.1 A Letter to James Childress

An extensive letter to James Childress at the Kennedy Institute in 1977 elaborates his refusal to allow the emotion of regret to overshadow an insistence on the moral norms of justifiable war. He discusses the call from others for an account of contrition in his political ethics, saying,

Perhaps I have not searched for the precise word or words to use for the still remaining inward reverberations of agape in justified participation in war, because mine has been too much an ‘ethics of action’. Under that head, I would call your attention to more than a moral trace that remains in the structure of acts of war for me, namely, the cruciality of the distinction between direct intention and indirect collateral killing. ... That still seems more crucial than ‘compunction’ or ‘regret’.<sup>41</sup>

By pointing to the “moral trace” involved in his account of political action Ramsey assumes that regret must be made possible by prior standards with which to judge right from wrong. For instance, the distinction of note here is one separating direct intention (murder) from indirect killing. He had long contended that ‘murder is never ordinate; but unfortunately a good deal of killing may be’.<sup>42</sup> His point to Childress is simply that if we are to rightly feel “regret” in war we must have a sense of which

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Ramsey to James Childress, January 21, 1977, Box 5, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Ramsey, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968; reprint, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1983), 348.

actions ought certainly to evoke that sentiment, e.g., murder, and which remain morally ambiguous, e.g., killing.

In the discussion of deferred repentance this led him to say that even it was made ‘quite impossible, where there is nothing in violation of fundamental principle to repent of, and to negotiate out of the realm of possibility’.<sup>43</sup> The danger of calling for regret or repentance without proper attention to moral principles is that it can quickly become an instrument of self-justification. His seminary roommate and longtime friend Caxton Doggett warned him early in his career about the misuse of such sentiments. He wrote to Ramsey, ‘the self-knowledge of one who “sins bravely” but repentantly ... is in the picture; but that form of self-knowledge ... distorts the picture when brought to the fore – it uses “humility” and “repentance” and “debasement” as instruments of self-exaltation’.<sup>44</sup> This is precisely his concern with calls for regret or contrition as the principal substance of a political ethic. It invites self-deception and the erosion of moral principles governing acts of judgment.

To Childress he decries this error and says that the omission of contrition as a feature of his political thought ‘is to be explained (not excused) by the silliness of repenting for something that one judges to be an actual duty even while engaging in its performance, calling down on all heads alike God’s “justification”’.<sup>45</sup> In light of the previous discussion of the two forms of repentance we can see clearly the target

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<sup>43</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 13.

<sup>44</sup> Caxton Doggett to Paul Ramsey, undated, Box 7, Ramsey Papers. The letter was most likely written in the early 1940s (around the time of ‘Sin, Repentance, and History’) as it makes reference to a young Marcia Neal, Ramsey’s first daughter. This idea that repentance is either done for good reason – i.e., in response to acts in need of forgiveness – or it is done foolishly, appears also in Ramsey’s account of offering “reasonable redescription” to acts in order to justify them morally. He says, ‘The reasonable redescription of human actions in these instances is either a product of a love informed reason or else it is a foolish waste of time’. Paul Ramsey, ‘Some Rejoinders’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 4, no. 2 (1976): 192.

<sup>45</sup> Ramsey to Childress.

of his claim. Sorrow and regret are counterproductive to *current* moral action – their theological function is always subsequent to the act. They also offer no justification to an otherwise immoral act. Ramsey says this to Childress in political terms:

‘Repentance or sorrow doesn’t do anything to excuse [a war]’.<sup>46</sup> That is why the ‘Christian soldier does not blubber over his gunpowder – or the religious equivalent of that’.<sup>47</sup>

Ramsey rightly sees that this begs an additional question in the discussion with Childress. If Christians pursue political action through constructive judgments of right and wrong, how are they also to account for and limit the hubris behind those judgments? Michael McKenzie helps to capture his response to challenges of this sort, noting that Ramsey’s just war theory ‘was never meant to imply the presence of *real* justice on one side, its absence on the other. It does imply, however, that distinctions can still be made regarding competing and *relative* claims for justice’.<sup>48</sup> The just war theory should only ever involve relative judgments of right and wrong – this was the impetus behind his belief that it ‘is better called the theory of *justified* war!’.<sup>49</sup>

In the letter to Childress he pushes away from ‘objective’ claims to justice by trying ‘to get away from the “juridical model”, of declaration as a sentence from an impartial court’.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless he maintains that

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. The imagery of a soldier blubbering over gunpowder is one of Ramsey’s favorite ways of making his point. In addition to the above reference in ‘The Manger, the Cross and the Resurrection’, it also appears in *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950), 188.

<sup>48</sup> McKenzie, *Paul Ramsey’s Ethics*, 114. In the original publication of ‘A Political Ethics Context for Strategic Thinking’ he speaks of ‘the relative justice of all kingdoms, empires and nations’. Morton A. Kaplan, ed., *Strategic Thinking and Its Moral Implications* (Chicago: University of Chicago Center for Policy Study, 1973), 102.

<sup>49</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Ramsey to Childress.

Still one does the ostensibly just thing without subjective guilt. So there not only can but must be relative judgments of justice ad bellum, without the claim to encompass objective justice. Here I would say the overarching Christian perspectives of sin, tragedy, God's overruling, forgiveness, historical vocation, etc., have their profound significance— but not that of vacating the room and need for jus ad bellum.<sup>51</sup>

In response to the call for a more robust account of political repentance he refuses to compromise the moral necessity of ostensible judgments. If repentance is not to become an instrument of self-justification, if it is not to lose its “profound significance”, it must not be used as a tool for vacating the proper function of judgment in the Christian political life.<sup>52</sup>

This is why the “structure of acts of war” is more crucial to Ramsey than notions of compunction or guilt. This is also why he speaks in *War and the Christian Conscience* of principles of righteousness ‘by which wrong gains some meaning’.<sup>53</sup> Moral norms simply play a more fundamental role in the determination of right political action – to allow contrition or regret to diminish the significance of right judgment would be to mischaracterize the moral task before us.

### 3.2.2 A Letter to Kent Knutson, Editor of *Dialog*

In early 1967 his essay, ‘How Shall the Vietnam War be Justified?’, was published in *Dialog* with the revised title ‘Is Vietnam A Just War?’.<sup>54</sup> Not only did the editor’s replacement of the original title offend Ramsey’s appreciation for the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid. Ramsey makes a similar distinction elsewhere, speaking of ‘a distinction between absolute righteousness, i.e., a system of right relations to God, and relative righteousness, i.e., a system of right relationships mainly in the legal sphere, reconing (*sic*) with and adjusted to the sinfulness of human nature’. Unpublished notes, Box 42, Ramsey Papers. He speaks in these notes of several versions of ‘the relative justice theory’.

<sup>52</sup> In 1961 he expresses this by saying that the magistrate ‘does what he can and may and must, without regarding himself as lord of the future or, on the other hand, as covered with guilt by accident or unforeseen consequences’. *War and the Christian Conscience*, 201.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘Is Vietnam a Just War?’, *Dialog* 6, no. 1 (1967): 19-29. See also McKenzie, *Paul Ramsey’s Ethics*, 124.

distinction between ostensible and objective justice (and therein just war and justified war), the essay itself also incensed several of his critics. Robert Hoyer and Gordon J. Dahl responded with strongly critical essays in the subsequent issue titled 'Sad Self-Justification' and 'Repentance Rather than Rationalization', respectively.<sup>55</sup> Ramsey then wrote a letter on May 10 to Kent Knutson, editor of *Dialog*, responding to Hoyer and Dahl. It was published later that year under the heading 'Two Extremes: Ramsey Replies to His Critics'.<sup>56</sup>

Both essays criticize his refusal to condemn US participation in Vietnam. Hoyer observes, 'the sadness lies in the fact that [Ramsey has] left no room for Christian ambivalence and doubt, no room for repentance'.<sup>57</sup> In response Ramsey invokes a similar distinction to the one noted previously between ostensible justice and objective justice. He writes,

I do not regard a line of ethical or political reasoning which justifies an action over its alternatives as thereby 'justifying' human agents or persons before God, rightwising their standing or making them righteous. For Hoyer, justification has the effect of levelling all distinctions between the just and the unjust, and the relatively more or less just; and this I do not think was the meaning of God's causing his rain to fall upon them both or His sun to shine upon each alike.<sup>58</sup>

Hoyer misunderstands this impulse to protect the role of relative judgments in the Vietnam conflict. As McKenzie notes, 'Hoyer has confused the horizontal with the

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<sup>55</sup> Robert Hoyer, 'Sad Self-Justification', *Dialog* 6, no. 2 (1967): 142-144; Gordon J. Dahl, 'Repentance Rather than Rationalization', *Dialog* 6, no. 2 (1967): 144-145.

<sup>56</sup> Paul Ramsey to Kent Knutson, May 10, 1967, Box 14, Ramsey Papers. It was published as Paul Ramsey, 'Two Extremes: Ramsey Replies to His Critics', *Dialog* 6, no. 3 (1967): 218-219. I will cite in this paper from the original version of the editorial letter in the Ramsey Papers.

<sup>57</sup> Hoyer, 'Sad Self-Justification', 142.

<sup>58</sup> Ramsey to Knutson. One example of Hoyer "levelling" all distinctions is his claim that 'All of the arguments based on Viet Cong evil can be and are used by the thief who steals from the heartless banker; the priests who crucified Jesus lest the whole nation perish. We all justify what we do. To argue justification on the basis of another man's evil is far from the moral order. In this day of striving for understanding, it is not even honest'. Hoyer, 'Sad Self-Justification', 142.

vertical. Or better, he has left no room for the horizontal'.<sup>59</sup> Ramsey's point is that while ostensible judgments surely do not justify an individual before God, neither does the universal need for forgiveness "level" all earthly distinctions. What is "levelled" by repentance is the hubris of our judgments, not the judgments themselves.

Hoyer also overlooks the fact that without moral distinctions there is no basis for choosing one action over another. Ramsey says,

One really cannot suck everything into 'justification', 'faith', 'repentance'; or level everything before these grand moments in the Christian life. Not least of the telling arguments against this is that then there would be no reason why even Lutherans worry so much about what they should do. Even in luminous moments of faith, they are still concerned to know what to do.<sup>60</sup>

The problem with a theological interpretation of political action which abandons moral distinctions is that the void is quickly replaced by a cultural alternative. In the example of the Vietnam war, he is acutely aware that an American ethic will take the place of a Christian ethic. Thus, he warns,

If we do not prolong Christian moral judgments into life and show that life-situations are corrigible to Christian ethical analysis, and that even Lutherans have justifiable ways of telling what they should or should not do, then the consequence will not be shapeless behavior in which one act is like any other before God. The result will rather be that Christian life and thought will be shaped by the 'evil military necessity/pacifist' syndrome. Something from the American way of life will tell us what to do!<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> McKenzie, *Paul Ramsey's Ethics*, 127. What McKenzie observes of Ramsey's doctrine of sin also applies here to his theology of repentance: 'the "natural" or "secular" person is not as bad off as many Christian moralists believe; likewise, the Christian moralist may not be as well off as he or she thinks. This levelling out should result in respect for many of the political decisions which are handed down by politicians and less certitude on the part of those Christians who see the gospel infallibility addressing every social issue' (13).

<sup>60</sup> Ramsey to Knutson. He describes this elsewhere while giving a lecture at Perkins School of Theology. Quoting a speaker at a previous seminar, he approvingly observes, 'One cannot stand before God and there be nothing else to be done in moral and social life'. Paul Ramsey, 'Tradition and Reflection in Christian Life', *Perkins Journal* 35, no. 2 (1982): 46.

<sup>61</sup> Ramsey to Knutson.



Setting aside his jabs at Lutherans, these two comments exhibit his anxiety over the consequences of Hoyer's logic. A theology of repentance of that sort threatens to eliminate any possibility of a constructive moral and political good.

His response to Dahl, though shorter, is essentially the same. He says, 'you could not call for "repentance rather than rationalization" unless by some alternative form of rationalization you first established what it is we politically should repent of'.<sup>62</sup> He insists on the fundamental priority of moral norms to any functional notion of political repentance. He also rejects any appeal to repentance as a way of avoiding difficult political determinations of right and wrong.

The following year, in 'Politics as Science, Not Prophecy', Ramsey observes that 'theologically speaking, we grasp something of God's *overruling* of man's ruling and self-ruling. To use this notion in our analysis of *present* experience, however, to introduce it into our analysis of the prospective shape of things to come or (hopefully) to be given to experience ahead is always a category mistake'.<sup>63</sup> The category mistake made by Hoyer and Dahl is one of "levelling" all moral judgments under the weight of the "grand moments" of the Christian life. What becomes most clear in his response is the attempt to avoid that mistake by appreciating the proper tension between a need for human judgments and the transcendence of divine judgment. Repentance is made possible only by the prior identification of moral norms and takes shape in the pursuit of constructive political action.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ramsey, 'Politics as Science', 18.

### 3.3 Repentance as a Theological Foundation for Ramsey's Political Ethics

At the conclusion of the previous chapter I noted that Ramsey takes Niebuhr's account of repentance in a new direction by emphasizing the importance of constructive political action. In this chapter the aim has been to illuminate the theological rationale for that move by examining several of his explicit discussions of repentance in print and in personal correspondence. The remaining task is to make several concluding observations about the function of repentance in his political theology. These will help pave the way for my return to the topic in chapters seven and eight.

First, notice the emphasis on political judgment. This tends to appear in the form of deference to those in positions of political authority, but our attention is directed toward the structure of the political act rather than the transcendence of the agent. In his response to David Little Ramsey speaks in favor of 'not so much the levelling of kings and emperors as the elevation of the private consciences of free men in political initiatives and resistance'.<sup>64</sup> The "elevation" brought about by this emphasis on judgment is one that promotes discrimination between political alternatives on any level of authority.

This is because his principle theological distinction is between divine judgment and human judgments. There is a recurring interplay between that which is human – limited judgments, ostensible justice, knowledge of repentance for unrighteousness, etc. – and that which is divine – eternal judgment, objective justice, knowledge of repentance for righteousness, etc. He repeatedly insists on the significance of the distinction precisely because he wants both to avoid the

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<sup>64</sup> Ramsey, 'Some Rejoinders', 187.

presumption that human judgments reflect the divine perspective and to grant to limited judgments their due regard in created existence. He attributes great moral import to particular political judgments of justice and injustice while simultaneously contextualizing those judgments in a theological account of divine transcendence.

Ramsey learned from Niebuhr that the suffering of the innocent in war should focus our attention on the ambiguity of human political claims to justice. This leads to recognition of our contingency and the description of human judgments as only ever ostensible in light of divine judgment. We must add to this his acute sense of the temporal character of human agency. One feature of deferred repentance is the insistence that achievement of political goods takes time. He also orders his theology of repentance around sensitivity to the proper role of contrition *subsequent* to sin. In this way his reflections on repentance demonstrate the reliance of all moral political judgments on a prior theological account of certain features of human interaction, namely, the contingency and temporality of created existence. We will return to this point again later.

## Section II

### Covenant and Political Decision-Making

The second section of this study examines the concept of covenant in Ramsey's political theology. In *Basic Christian Ethics* he uses social contract philosophy as a heuristic device for understanding the political implications of Israel's covenant with Yahweh. His later disillusionment with Rousseau leads him to turn to Karl Barth's doctrine of creation as a foundation for political ethics. I argue that he develops his *esse/bene esse* view of politics out of Barth's internal basis/external basis formula. Finally, I demonstrate the role covenant plays in his understanding of moral theory and ecclesiological limitation of the church as 'theoretician'. This highlights his sensitivity to the contingency and temporality of created existence in the articulation of a political theology rooted in covenant.

## Chapter Four

### Ramsey's Analogical Reading of Covenant and Contract

Political decision also should be guided by the righteousness of the God we know through the covenant. ... As long as God's covenant endures, human community cannot rightly be grounded in anything else.<sup>1</sup>

– Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*

Covenant is as ubiquitous in Ramsey's theological ethics as repentance is absent. Jeffrey Siker notes that 'covenant is *the* biblical theme around which he chooses to organize his appropriation of biblical ethics'.<sup>2</sup> It appears as early as the 1940s in articles preceding *Basic Christian Ethics* and as late as the 1980s in a published letter responding to James Gustafson's interpretation of his work. Given its commanding presence, it is unsurprising that in an interview late in his career he refers to covenant as the *Leitmotif* of his work.<sup>3</sup>

In his political writings the concept tends to come and go. It features heavily in *Basic Christian Ethics* and *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*.<sup>4</sup> Yet, his reliance on covenant in his principal publications on war from the 1960s is so concealed that William Werpehowski observes, 'the virtual absence of talk of creation, covenant, and fellow humanity in Ramsey's political ethics is especially striking'.<sup>5</sup> It appears again

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 388.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey S. Siker, *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth-Century Portraits* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 85.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth L. Vaux, Sara Vaux, and Mark Stenberg, eds., *Covenants of Life: Contemporary Medical Ethics in Light of the Thought of Paul Ramsey*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 256.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* (New York: Association Press, 1961)

<sup>5</sup> William Werpehowski, *American Protestant Ethics and the Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 51. See also pages 38-40.

in his final book, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*, and in the previously published appendix to that volume, 'A Political Ethics Context for Strategic Thinking'.<sup>6</sup>

The aim of the next three chapters is to trace the concept of covenant in Ramsey's political theology. Because he tends to be inconsistent with his use of the term, this task requires wrestling with those passages which employ it explicitly, as well as his introduction of other terms and concepts which take its significance for granted. In this chapter I will examine the way his early work uses an analogy with the social contract of Jean Jacques Rousseau to underscore the political significance of Israel's covenant with Yahweh. On the basis of this comparison he argues that all relevant considerations of political society can be addressed via the notion of covenant.<sup>7</sup>

First, however, I want to take note of a few basic ideas from his doctoral research at Yale University. As with the discussion of repentance, I believe Ramsey's critique of "absolute idealism" provides a helpful point of entry into issues that arise in his later work. Thus, I will begin by offering initial comments on Rousseau's role in 'The Nature of Man in the Philosophy of Josiah Royce and Bernard Bosanquet'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); 'A Political Ethics Context for Strategic Thinking', in *Strategic Thinking and Its Moral Implications*, ed. Morton A. Kaplan (Chicago: University of Chicago Center for Policy Study, 1973), 101-147.

<sup>7</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 367.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Ramsey, 'The Nature of Man in the Philosophy of Josiah Royce and Bernard Bosanquet' (Ph.D. thesis, Yale University, 1943), Box 53, The Paul Ramsey Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Perkins-Bostock Library, Duke University. For extended treatments see D. Stephen Long, *Tradition, Tragedy, Transformism: The Ethics of Paul Ramsey* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993) and Kevin Carnahan, 'Sin, Guilt, Justice and War: Paul Ramsey and Reinhold Niebuhr on the Moral Framework for Just War Thought', Ph.D. diss., Southern Methodist University, 2007.

#### 4.1 Initial Comments on Rousseau in Ramsey's Doctoral Research

I mentioned above that this chapter is occupied with Ramsey's use of Rousseau's social contract as a heuristic device for identifying the political implications of Israel's covenant with Yahweh. Rousseau appears in several of his early writings as a kind of flintstone on which he sharpens his understanding of other thinkers and ideas.<sup>9</sup> This is certainly the case in his doctoral writings on Josiah Royce and Bernard Bosanquet. He marshals philosophical points from *The Social Contract* and *The Discourses* throughout the thesis to make various observations about Bosanquet's philosophy (Royce, too, though to a lesser extent).<sup>10</sup> Most importantly, however, Rousseau sharpens Ramsey's appreciation for the value of the absolute idealist philosophical emphasis on the individual nature of the human self in light of an Other, or "Absolute".

In chapter one I observed that "absolute idealism" draws his attention to the relationship between the finite self and the infinite "Absolute". He recognizes the general will in Rousseau (as well as in Royce and Bosanquet) as 'a sort of lesser case of the Absolute'.<sup>11</sup> The general will is not the "Absolute" – that, for Ramsey, is God – but he contends that the idea of the general will is able to shed light, by analogy, on the nature of the relationship between God and humanity. For example, he sees the transcendence of the general will over the individual as analogous to the radical transcendence of the divine will over any exercise of human agency.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Paul Ramsey, 'A Theory of Democracy: Idealistic or Christian?', *Ethics* 56, no. 4 (1946): 251-266; 'Elements of a Biblical Political Theory', *The Journal of Religion* 29, no. 4 (1949): 258-283. He also uses Rousseau in *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1967) and elsewhere.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Ramsey, 'Nature of Man', 166.

Problems emerge, however, when the God/general will analogy shifts into the realm of ethics. Ramsey expresses sharp disagreements with the absolute idealist belief that the “self” is the source of moral obligation. This view is particularly influenced by Kant and his ‘view of duty as self-imposed’.<sup>12</sup> More importantly for this discussion, it also inherits the idea from Rousseau’s view of a social contract where ‘the individual by his own consent and action places upon himself a social obligation’.<sup>13</sup> Ramsey rejects both of these accounts and their influences on “absolute idealism”, saying, ‘we agree that there are duties of the self to itself. ... But, we deny that in this consists the entirety of man’s obligation or that it is the whole of ethics’.<sup>14</sup>

He rejects Rousseau as a foundation for ethics and criticizes both Royce and Bosanquet for their failure to account for the will of God in their concepts of obligation. He believes they take from Rousseau the idea that the self must teach itself what it really wants (which, consequently, produces a tension between what the self is and what it wants to be). But even if this is true in the sense that ‘our restlessness is perhaps the source of the knowledge of duty even to ourselves’, he insists nonetheless that ‘our restlessness comes from our nature, and our nature comes from God’.<sup>15</sup> The dialectical, two-sided self cannot be the root of moral obligation because ‘a proper generic definition of obligation is the “will of God”’.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 199. As mentioned in chapter one, Ramsey’s tendency to summarize concepts from Royce and Bosanquet makes it difficult to locate his critical voice. Statements that begin with “we”, however, typically indicate that he is submitting his final analysis of the material.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 205. G. Scott Davis comments on the same sentiments in Ramsey’s use of Dostoevsky in *Nine Modern Moralists*: ‘If life is to make sense, then it must be lived to an end, and this means recognizing a legitimate authority other than the personal self. And try as he might to avoid the conclusion, this means acknowledging God’. “‘Et Quod Vis Fac’: Paul Ramsey and Augustinian Ethics’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 19, no. 2 (1991): 41. The chapter on Dostoevsky in *Nine Modern Moralists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962) helps add substance to some of the more technical philosophical claims of his thesis.

<sup>16</sup> Ramsey, ‘Nature of Man’ 203.



What Ramsey takes from this engagement with Rousseau is the firm conviction that moral obligation can only be rooted in the will of God. Thus, Rousseau is of limited use for ethics because of the glaring ‘need for an object of obligation other than the self’.<sup>17</sup> He contributes to the analysis of “absolute idealism” by highlighting the failure of Bosanquet and Royce to ‘assimilate their notion of obligation to the traditional Christian view of the “will of God” and to the essence of the religious experience’.<sup>18</sup> These developments contribute to the discussion at hand because they prepare Ramsey for his use of Rousseau in a similar manner in *Basic Christian Ethics*. There he compares the divide between the general will and the individual will in the social contract with the asymmetrical relationship between Israel and Yahweh. That, however, may be to get too far ahead of myself. First I must answer a few questions about what he finds so attractive in the covenant/contract analogy.

#### 4.2 The Covenant/Contract Analogy in *Basic Christian Ethics*

On August 1, 1949, Ramsey received a letter from William Savage at Charles Scribner’s Sons echoing the ‘excellent report’ from their reader and guaranteeing publication of the manuscript of *Basic Christian Ethics*.<sup>19</sup> That reader was Reinhold Niebuhr. His review urges publication, but voices two concerns: first, that it ‘does

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 204. D.S. Long’s reading of the thesis fails to adequately account for the places where Ramsey subjects “absolute idealism” to a fundamental critique by Christianity. See, for instance, his claim that Ramsey ‘was more concerned with a theistic grounding of anthropology than a Christological reading of human nature’. Long, *Tragedy*, 43. It is also worth noting that he sustains an emphasis on the divine will throughout his career, noting in his later work, ‘Jewish and Christian ethics makes ultimate appeal to a divine performance as the ground for and the source of the core content of men’s correlative obligations to one another’. Paul Ramsey, ‘Kant’s Moral Theology or Religious Ethics’, in *The Roots of Ethics*, ed. Daniel Callahan and H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr. (New York: Plenum Press, 1981), 163.

<sup>19</sup> William Savage to Paul Ramsey, August 1, 1949, Box 32, Ramsey Papers.

not deal with that side of ethics which is concerned with “institutions” or the organized social arrangements of mankind’, and second, that ‘he does not elucidate how the “love” ethic of the Scriptures and of Christian life is related to the rational norms of justice and the equity by which the life of the world is ordered and its institutions organized’.<sup>20</sup> Niebuhr submits that one or two additional chapters would be sufficient to address these issues.

Ramsey initially resisted the idea of elongating the manuscript, suggesting instead that he be given the option of revision within five years time.<sup>21</sup> Eventually, however, he supplied three additional chapters, the last of which (chapter ten) was ‘The Religious Foundation for Community Life’. This was a version of an essay published earlier that year in *The Journal of Religion* titled ‘Elements of a Biblical Political Theory’.<sup>22</sup> He not only believed that this essay would address several of Niebuhr’s concerns, but as his career developed he came to appreciate its material and often referred critics back to it as evidence of his early understanding of covenant as an ethical concept.<sup>23</sup>

A central aspect of this important essay is his claim that engaging with the ‘early modern social philosophers’ will produce ‘greatly increased understanding of the biblical notion of covenant’.<sup>24</sup> But of all the available philosophical and

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. The review of *Basic Christian Ethic* was blind for Ramsey at the time. He reveals in later correspondence that ‘Reine Niebuhr’ was the reviewer. See Paul Ramsey to Gilbert Meilander, September 18, 1981, Box 17, Ramsey Papers. D.S. Long was the first scholar to make this connection. See Long, *Tragedy*, 35.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Ramsey to William Savage, March 7, 1948, Box 32, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>22</sup> Ramsey, ‘Elements’.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Paul Ramsey, ‘A Letter to James Gustafson’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 13 (1985): 74. He also offered a testy response to an inquiry from an equally testy Ph.D. student, reminding him that ‘first, the Biblical material concerning God’s acts in times past, and, second, the final chapter of BCE, were not accidents’. Paul Ramsey to David Schmidt, January 8, 1982, Box 25, Ramsey Papers. In fact, without the publisher’s insistence that he follow Niebuhr’s recommendations, the final chapter would not have appeared at all.

<sup>24</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 368.

theological resources, why does he choose the social contract as his principal point of comparison with Israel's covenant? It is worth keeping in mind that he lectured the material in *Basic Christian Ethics* in introductory courses at Princeton for several years prior to its publication. Rousseau would certainly have been an accessible thinker (and widely available text) for undergraduate teaching. He notes in 'Elements' that 'on hearing the word "covenant", we are likely to think of ... the idea of "social contract" employed by early modern political theory'.<sup>25</sup> He is likely to have found the covenant/contract analogy a useful device in his undergraduate teaching. Furthermore, it seems to have been effective: *Basic Christian Ethics* was written as a textbook and sold quite well throughout the fifties due to heavy use in college and seminary classrooms.<sup>26</sup>

That is also how Ramsey received his instruction on the material. He acknowledges that his covenant/contract discussion is 'greatly indebted to studies pursued under the direction of Professor Charles W. Hendel of Yale University and to his illuminating interpretation of the social philosophers'.<sup>27</sup> Hendel was head of the philosophy department and Ramsey took two courses with him in the early 1940s. Much of the analysis in *Basic Christian Ethics* follows the structure and content of his notes from those courses, as well as Hendel's essay in *Contemporary Idealism in America*.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ramsey, 'Elements', 259.

<sup>26</sup> See the published book file on *Basic Christian Ethics* in Box 33, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>27</sup> Ramsey, 'Elements', 269. Kevin Carnahan observes the extent of Hendel's influence on his early work. See 'Sin, Guilt, Justice and War', 27-29.

<sup>28</sup> Boxes 42, 43 and 44 of the Ramsey Papers contain notes from his courses at Yale as well as lecture notes from his early years at Princeton. Those materials add context to his arguments in *Basic Christian Ethics* and will be cited consistently throughout my discussion here. See also Charles W. Hendel, 'The Meaning of Obligation', in *Contemporary Idealism in America*, ed. Clifford Barrett (New York: Macmillan, 1932), 237-296.

Finally, he takes up Rousseau in order to correct an erroneous interpretation by Millar Burrows in *An Outline of Biblical Theology*.<sup>29</sup> Ramsey sees in social contract theories a fundamental divide ‘according to whether two contracts were assumed or only one’.<sup>30</sup> Single-contract theories establish ‘absolute sovereignty’ because they require no further agreement for the foundation of political authority. Double-contract theories, by contrast, first establish ‘limited sovereignty’ and then negotiate a second contract for political authority on the basis of inalienable human rights.<sup>31</sup> The problem with Burrows’ account is not only that ‘he does not distinguish clearly enough’ between these two theories, but that he also fails to appreciate the implications of the distinction when considering them alongside Israel’s covenant.<sup>32</sup> Ramsey is adamant that the covenant cannot be similar to a double-contract theory – the parallel would indicate that Yahweh possesses only limited sovereignty and Israel retains certain inalienable rights in the relationship. Thus, he posits over and against Burrows the belief that in the nature of the case any fundamental social contract must be *primarily* one or the other.

The disagreement allows Ramsey to argue that ‘without ceasing to be fully aware of the danger of misleading analogies, it is still true to say that ... Israel’s covenant was more like a single covenant establishing absolute sovereignty’.<sup>33</sup> This sets in motion his development of the analogy between Rousseau’s social contract and Israel’s covenant with Yahweh. I want to briefly examine three features of that analogy – his emphasis on absolute sovereignty, the formation of the political

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<sup>29</sup> Millar Burrows, *An Outline of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1946).

<sup>30</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 368.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 368-369.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 369-370.

community and the significance of consent. This will afford a critical perspective on his early use of covenant as a theological foundation for political ethics.

#### 4.2.1 Sovereignty, Community and the Significance of Consent

Because of the disagreement with Burrows, Ramsey is principally attracted to the analogy for its ability to highlight the absolute sovereignty of Yahweh.

Rousseau's social contract assigns an unqualified sovereignty to the general will that is 'simple and single, and it cannot be divided without being destroyed'.<sup>34</sup> Ramsey observes a similarly transcendent and indivisible political authority in 'the sovereign God [who] cannot be represented except by himself'.<sup>35</sup> Despite his enthusiasm for this comparison, he also acknowledges that a significant dissimilarity plagues the analogy. Whereas the social contract brings into existence the general will (and therein a sovereign political authority), Ramsey sees clearly that the story of Israel involves a pre-existing political authority calling the Hebrew people into covenantal relationship. Thus, a significant difference arises 'mainly from the fact that Rousseau constructs a sovereign while Israel recognizes one'.<sup>36</sup>

Earlier in *Basic Christian Ethics* he suggests that no amount of self-interest can 'move across the border where community still needs to be created if it is to exist at all. This is the work of Christian love'.<sup>37</sup> What this means in the discussion of sovereignty is that Yahweh precedes and calls Israel in a way discontinuous with the formation of the general will. He observes that 'God did not depend on the fate of the nation or on his recognition and guarantee of the rights of the people; these depended

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<sup>34</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 111.

<sup>35</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 380.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

on him'.<sup>38</sup> Israel is able to recognize the sovereign that precedes them precisely because Yahweh 'had already decisively spoken and revealed his purpose to them in delivering them from Egypt'.<sup>39</sup> In this way he uses the social contract as a heuristic device to call attention to the absolute (and eternal) sovereignty of God.

Along with this set of observations come two further covenant/contract parallels. One is that both the social contract and Israel's covenant yield collective political bodies. Rousseau sets out to protect individual freedoms that are threatened by the state of nature and natural, physical inequalities. The result is a contract which produces 'a moral and collective body made up of as many members as the assembly has voices, and which receives by this same act its unity, its common *self*, its life and its will'.<sup>40</sup> Ramsey likens this to the way Yahweh's creative action 'served as a kind of charter or national constitution' for the Hebrew people.<sup>41</sup> He says, 'in covenanting with Israel [Yahweh] *made* her a nation'.<sup>42</sup> The analogy highlights the fact that it was 'the covenant with Yahweh by which the community came into existence'.<sup>43</sup>

Here, however, Ramsey must be careful not to overlook the substantially divergent nature of those political communities. One of the two aspects that

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 376. Nor did Yahweh's existence derive from his role as Israel's redeemer. Ramsey says elsewhere, 'Yahweh is free. His deity does not depend on his saving the people'. Unpublished notes, Box 44, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>39</sup> Ramsey, unpublished notes, Box 43, Ramsey Papers. He adds, 'Yahweh was a god before He made the covenant with the people; and presumably He could do without this people and still remain a god. The tribe was not necessary to his deity'.

<sup>40</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 50. W. Blake Odgers describes the construction, saying, 'As soon as individuals have entered into a "social contract" ... they become a political community, a body politic ... It has a corporate self (*moi commun*) and possesses opinions which are its General Will (*volonté générale*)'. 'A Defence of Rousseau's Theory of the Social Contract' *Journal of the Society of Comparative Legislation* 16, no. 2 (1916): 328.

<sup>41</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 367. He also says, 'With whatever group ... God makes covenant, they gain a nature as a religious nation which can no more be broken than you can break his covenant with the day and his covenant with the night'. Ramsey, 'Elements', 261.

<sup>42</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 372.

<sup>43</sup> Ramsey, Unpublished notes, Box 42, Ramsey Papers.

Rousseau identifies in natural humanity in *The Discourses* is self-interest.<sup>44</sup> Civil society secures individual freedoms because it is rooted in self-interest (and with self-interest, property). He says, ‘the first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to him to say *this is mine*, and found people sufficiently simple to believe him, was the true founder of civil society’.<sup>45</sup> The problem is that a political community founded on self-interest (and for the protection of self-interest) cannot sustain itself forever. In *The Social Contract* this translates into a perpetually degenerate general will. Rousseau says, ‘the body politic, just like the body of a man, begins to die as soon as it is born and carries within itself the causes of its destruction’.<sup>46</sup>

Contrast this with the eschatological destiny of Israel. Ramsey highlights Isaiah 24:5, noting, ‘Israel’s unusual share in the relationship is described as “breaking the everlasting covenant”, breaking the unbreakable!’<sup>47</sup> While Israel’s responsibility is to be faithfully obedient, the covenant is never reliant on her obedience. It is eternally upheld by the promise of Yahweh to ‘maintain intact the covenant he *commands*’.<sup>48</sup> He notes, ‘every Jew knew that the fidelity already displayed by God in the initiative he had taken to establish it could surely be counted on to keep the covenant secure’.<sup>49</sup> Even in light of the contrast of their divergent ends, the contract/covenant analogy functions as a heuristic device to demonstrate Israel’s creation and destiny as a political community.

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<sup>44</sup> Rousseau, *The Discourses*, 127. The other is pity.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>46</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 109.

<sup>47</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 371.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 370-371. He says, ‘Obedience to the covenant was thought of as “commanded” on account of God’s firmness, and God was firm on account of his trustworthy character and his unswerving faithfulness to covenant’ (370).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 370.

Finally, the last parallel concerns the significance of consent in the establishment of contract and covenant. In an early essay from 1946 Ramsey voices concerns with ‘traditional defences’ of democracy which ‘lose all sight of human sinfulness’.<sup>50</sup> He points to Rousseau as an example of a thinker who can be used to correct that error, saying, ‘the truth of [Rousseau’s] position, we may provisionally concede, is that roughly the best practical machinery for assuring that the conditions be always the same for all is that every vote be counted. As a practical method consent comes in the long run as close to normative generality as those who are “but men” are likely to achieve by any other device’.<sup>51</sup> This funds his claim that ‘because of the sinfulness of man, we must be democratic in technique, as well as in the principle that rights be accorded to all’.<sup>52</sup> This early interest in the role of consent in political relations translates in the covenant/contract analogy into an emphasis on Israel’s faithful response to Yahweh as a morally significant element of the covenant relationship.

When speaking of Israel’s obedience to covenant, he says, ‘the people Israel are not only chosen by God, but they also “choose” Him for their God, and voluntarily enter into the covenant with him, freely undertaking to obey His laws’.<sup>53</sup> He also speaks of ‘the “ratification” or popular consent given the original covenant which God “commanded”’.<sup>54</sup> The idea of collective ratification in the social contract is useful as a heuristic device because it approximates the response demanded of Israel upon the formation of the covenant.

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<sup>50</sup> Ramsey, ‘A Theory of Democracy’, 257.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., See also *Basic Christian Ethics*, 333 and unpublished notes, Box 43, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>52</sup> Ramsey, ‘A Theory of Democracy’, 257. See also *Basic Christian Ethics*, 384.

<sup>53</sup> Unpublished notes, Box 42, Ramsey Papers. Rousseau for his part speaks of the ‘private person of each contracting party’ contracting to yield ‘the total alienation of each associate with all of his rights’. *The Social Contract*, 50.

<sup>54</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 381.



But this parallel, too, introduces problems for his understanding of covenant. Rousseau posits that morality is wholly absent in pre-contractual human relations.<sup>55</sup> He says, ‘this transition from the state of nature to the civil state produces a most remarkable change in man ... endowing his actions with the morality they previously lacked’.<sup>56</sup> Because the social contract precedes the identification of humans as moral agents, consent is a precondition for obligation. That is to say, if morality requires a political body and a political body requires consent through contract, then moral obligation becomes to a large degree consensual. While he may be willing to embrace a sense of “ratification” on the part of Israel, Ramsey is wholly unwilling to root moral obligation in their collective consent.

#### 4.2.2 Consent and Rousseau’s Emphasis on the Self

The issue of consent and Rousseau’s emphasis on the self merits further treatment for what it reveals about Ramsey’s approach to the political significance of covenant. I noted at the beginning of this chapter that his early philosophical engagements with Rousseau in ‘The Nature of Man’ drove him to reject the self as the ground of moral obligation. There he criticized Bosanquet and Royce for their proximity to Rousseau, as well as for their failure to account for the will of God in concepts of obligation. He continues this line of thought in notes from the years

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<sup>55</sup> Robert D. Masters notes, ‘It appears that although primitive man is “innocent,” he lacks not merely the “idea of goodness,” but also the *sentiment* of “goodness” in his “heart” (without which morality and virtue are impossible)’. *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 152. W.T. Jones also notes, ‘In a word, political morality depends on the consent of the citizens, and the consent of the citizens depends on there being a general will. ‘Rousseau’s General Will and the Problem of Consent’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 1 (1987): 106.

<sup>56</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 53. Paul J. Archambault observes Rousseau’s notion that sociality and morality (here described as corruption due to a loss of innocence and freedom) occur simultaneously, ‘Since our natural, innocent state is presocial and prehistorical, we enter the process of corruption the moment we become historical and social beings’. ‘Rousseau’s Tactical (Mis)Reading of Augustine’, *Symposium* 41, no. 1 (1987): 11.

before *Basic Christian Ethics*, warning that the attempt to use the self as ‘the source of obligation’ is ‘a subtle continuation of self-interest’ which ‘cultivates idolatry’.<sup>57</sup> In 1946 he writes that ‘mere consent does not suffice to determine the nature of political obligation. Since consent itself may be sinful, it is obliged to be right; it ought to agree only to what is just’.<sup>58</sup> If Ramsey is attracted to the parallel need for “ratification” or consent in covenant and contract, he is equally eager to avoid adopting Rousseau’s account of moral obligation rooted in the self.

In *Basic Christian Ethics* he does this first by observing that both moral obligation and natural order are grounded in God’s covenant faithfulness. In the Old Testament ‘two things filled the Hebrew mind with awe: the starry heavens above declaring the glory of God and the moral law within historical covenants’.<sup>59</sup> Yahweh’s initiation of the covenant supplies Israel with ‘a nature as a religious nation which can no more be broken than you can break his covenant with the day and his covenant with the night so that day and night no longer come at their appointed times (Jer. 33:20, 21)!’<sup>60</sup> This reinforces the divine will as the source of moral obligation and the radical obedience expected of Israel.

He also avoids the pitfalls of Rousseau’s emphasis on the self by suggesting that ‘to find a closer parallel to Israel’s covenant, we should not go to John Locke’s limitation of sovereignty but to Jean Bodin and Hugo Grotius’.<sup>61</sup> Bodin appreciates that ‘there might be some *recognized* authority to give law without consent’.<sup>62</sup> His

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<sup>57</sup> Unpublished notes, Box 43, Ramsey Papers. He adds that in the social contract ‘the ulterior relation of the self is still only to itself’ and that this means that ‘the voice of God is, in fact, the voice of self’. See also *Basic Christian Ethics*, 303.

<sup>58</sup> Ramsey, ‘A Theory of Democracy’, 259.

<sup>59</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 373.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 381. To go in the direction of Locke would be to blur, as Burrows does, the difference between single and double contract theories.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

political authority ‘rules by a kind of implicit “consent”, but consent is not necessary to his law’.<sup>63</sup> Ramsey thus uses Bodin to highlight the importance of consent without making it an essential element of moral obligation (law).

This approximates the transcendence of Yahweh over the covenant and the idea that ‘Israel ... was under obligation *to God*, who himself was not made sovereign by contract but by his own strong hand’.<sup>64</sup> In terms of moral obligation this highlights ‘Israel’s acknowledgement of the covenant by which she consented not to have to consent to law or to have a part in determining what is just’.<sup>65</sup> Bodin’s appreciation for the ability of political authority to demand obligation without consent more clearly resembles Israel’s sovereign than Rousseau’s account of sovereignty built on self-interest.

Grotius also describes political sovereignty in a way more similar to covenant than the social contract. He argues that ‘in the formation of a civil society or in its subjection to a ruler or rulers, a promise is made ... to abide by whatever the majority, or those entrusted with power, should decide’.<sup>66</sup> Because the political subjects ‘are not thereby demonstrably superior to the person so constituted’, it is unintelligible for individuals to transfer the right of governance to a sovereign and simultaneously retain that right to themselves.<sup>67</sup> Ramsey says, ‘the people keep possession of themselves and their personal liberty, but their civil liberty and “the perpetual right of governing them, as they are a people,” these are alienated’.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>66</sup> Hugo Grotius, ‘The Right of War and Peace’, in *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought*, ed. Oliver O’Donovan and Joan Lockwood O’Donovan (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 794. This passage is taken from the prolegomena, section fifteen.

<sup>67</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 383.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 384.

This transference of ‘rights of a governing kind’ places upon the sovereign the responsibility not to abandon the collective body or to ‘turn them over to the governance of another’.<sup>69</sup> The security of the relationship rests not on continued consent but on the protection of the sovereign. Ramsey believes this more adequately reflects the Old Testament notion that once Israel responded to being chosen by Yahweh, not even disobedience could terminate the covenant. It was paradoxically understood as ‘breaking the unbreakable!’<sup>70</sup> If ‘consent’ is to be ‘at all a proper manner of speaking’ of the covenant relationship, ‘do they not consent to God’s “perpetual right of governing them, as they are a people”, themselves retaining no rights of a governing kind, nor yet the right of revoking what they have conferred?’<sup>71</sup>

The shift toward Bodin and Grotius and away from Rousseau on the issue of consent is symptomatic of the covenant/contract analogy on the whole. By that I mean that in his explanation of the usefulness of the social contract as a heuristic device Ramsey is consistently forced to push away from the emphasis on self-interest. This is the reason for his reminders that he is ‘in the midst of wide analogy’ and ‘fully aware of the danger of misleading analogies’.<sup>72</sup> Despite those warnings, I do not think he is completely free of such danger. I want to offer two critical observations of his account. The first concerns his inadequate support for the transition from covenant as the foundation of Israel as political community to covenant as the ground of the ‘human community’.<sup>73</sup> The second involves his

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 384. Ramsey makes similar observations in unpublished notes on the subjection of rights to community. He says, ‘Rights should never be regarded as absolute and unconditional. A right, though it belongs to an individual, belongs to him as a member of the community: this limits every right: it is not an indivisible entity which must be wholly possessed or wholly lost’. Unpublished notes, Box 45, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>72</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 379, 370.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 388.

attempt to link an emphasis on consent with divine will as the source of all moral obligation.

#### 4.3 From Israel to the ‘Human Community’

Ramsey opens the discussion of covenant and social contract theory by observing that ‘in the Bible God appears as a covenant-making, covenant-restoring and covenant-fulfilling God; Israel, as people of the covenant and a covenant-breaking people’.<sup>74</sup> He adds that covenant is ‘the foundation of human life in community’.<sup>75</sup> This transition – from the community of Israel to the human community – takes place on a number of occasions in the final chapter of *Basic Christian Ethics*. He notes that study of Israel’s covenant enables us to attend to the political ‘relevance or irrelevance’ of the sovereignty of God.<sup>76</sup> It also ‘gives man whereon to stand in opposing the present shape of the world’.<sup>77</sup> Most explicitly, he says ‘political decision also should be guided by the righteousness of God we know through the covenant ... As long as God’s covenant endures, human community cannot rightly be grounded in anything else’.<sup>78</sup> Each of these moves demonstrates his belief that the political significance of Israel’s covenant applies to all political communities.

My concern over this interpretive move has to do with his lack of theological rationale for the transition. Ramsey simply fails to spell out how Yahweh’s relationship with Israel relates to the human community as a whole. The answer, of course, is that the work of covenant-love in creation displays the same faithfulness to

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 367.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 384.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 387.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 388.

all humanity that Yahweh shows to Israel. Her redemption reveals Yahweh's sovereignty to the nations just as the natural order calls Israel to remember her obedience to the Creator. But Ramsey lacks a doctrine of creation on which to rest these claims.

He is not without the resources to make this connection more explicit. In unpublished notes on these subjects he observes 'the covenant with a chosen people is a part of God's purpose to save man in general from the dire consequences and universal sway of sin'.<sup>79</sup> Thus, 'the nationalistic promise is not given without other words: "in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed"'.<sup>80</sup> Even in the discussion of Burrows he is sensitive to the significance of nature in the Old Testament – the prophets such as Jeremiah 'spoke of these natural occurrences as due to "covenant"'.<sup>81</sup> Yet, the closest he comes to connecting creation and covenant is to cite approvingly Paul Minear's claim that 'in creating the world, God made a covenant with it' and add 'in covenanting with Israel, he *made* her a nation'.<sup>82</sup>

I want to suggest that his failure to establish a theological foundation for the move from Israel to the human community can be partly attributed to his attention to Rousseau. Take, for instance, their radically divergent interpretations of the covenant of Noah. Rousseau employs the flood narrative in his so-called *Second Discourse* to highlight the non-historical nature of the social contract, saying,

It did not even enter the mind of most of our philosophers to doubt that the state of Nature had existed whereas it is evident, from reading the Holy Scriptures, that the first Man having received some lights and Precepts immediately from God was not himself in that state, and that, if the Writings of Moses are granted the credence owed them by every Christian

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<sup>79</sup> Ramsey, unpublished notes, Box 42, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 371.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 372.

Philosopher, it has to be denied that, even before the Flood, Men were ever in the pure state of Nature, unless they relapsed into it by some extraordinary Occurrence: a Paradox most embarrassing to defend, and altogether impossible to prove.<sup>83</sup>

Humanity, if not with Adam then surely with the Noahic covenant, must have received direction from God which drew them beyond the state of nature. This underscores the discontinuity of the social contract with the natural order of humanity.

Ramsey, by contrast, uses the flood narrative as his first example that ‘the covenant enacted in history has the steadfastness of an order of nature’.<sup>84</sup> He says, ‘in the time of Noah, God covenanted everlastingly with “every living creature of every sort that is on the earth” (Gen. 9:16), imposing upon the rainfall his decree, establishing its barriers and doors’.<sup>85</sup> The Noahic covenant following the judgment of the flood affirms and restores creation and the created state of nature (and seals that covenant within nature through the rainbow of Genesis 9). It confirms to Israel the place their covenant holds in the created order.

The problem this example highlights is the way Ramsey’s attraction to the similarities between Rousseau’s contract and Israel’s covenant prevents him from attending to the more significant relationship between covenant and creation. The Noahic covenant is with “every living creature”, not simply Israel. This provides an opportunity for him to explain how the political implications of the Noahic covenant extend to all human communities. In fact, he makes precisely that claim many years later in ‘A Political Ethics Context for Strategic Thinking’.<sup>86</sup> But in *Basic Christian*

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<sup>83</sup> Rousseau, *The Discourses*, 132.

<sup>84</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 373.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>86</sup> I will discuss this claim at length in chapter seven. While Ramsey moves away from Rousseau as a significant influence on his theological use of covenant, he never gives up on the idea that it can be

*Ethics* the covenant/contract analogy distracts him from providing the adequate structural (i.e., theological) support to sustain a transition from Israel's covenant to the human community.

#### 4.4. Grotius and the Union of Consent and Creation

My second critical observation of Ramsey's covenant/contract analogy concerns his attempt to link an emphasis on consent with an account of moral obligation rooted in divine will. I mentioned above that he is drawn to the analogy in part because the notion of "consent" or "ratification" gestures toward the moral responsibility demanded of Israel in the covenant relationship with Yahweh. Unfortunately, he spends the majority of his time engaging with what he takes to be the more distant point of comparison: Rousseau. Only at the end of the discussion does he turn to closer parallels of Bodin and Grotius briefly to correct the centrality of self-interest in Rousseau's account. I believe a closer look at Grotius' contributions to political theology would have given Ramsey a resource for emphasizing divine will as the source of moral obligation and the demand for faithful response. Furthermore, comparison of Ramsey and Grotius contributes to my observation that his political use of covenant suffers from the absence of a doctrine of creation. I want thus to turn briefly to selected observations from Grotius in *The Right of War and Peace*.<sup>87</sup>

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used to ground our moral political relationships. In an interview conducted in his office in 1986 he observes, 'How in all the relations of life do we respond responsibly to one another and to God? We are a people covenantally related together, in a nation. We resolve to be together as a people through time'. Vaux, et. al., eds., *Covenants*, 256.

<sup>87</sup> LeRoy Walters discusses both Ramsey and Grotius in 'Historical Applications of the Just War Theory: Four Case Studies in Normative Ethics', in *Love and Society: Essays in the Ethics of Paul Ramsey*, ed. David H. Smith and James T. Johnson, (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 115-138. Unfortunately his aim is not to explore similarities in their thought but to 'complement the work of



The key to understanding Grotius' contribution to this discussion is to seize upon his insistence that pre-political humanity is still essentially social. That sociality is present because of God's work in creation and the influence of covenant on human nature. He says, 'the mother of natural Right is human nature, which would incline us to one another's society even if we had no needs at all. The mother of civil Right, on the other hand, is obligation created by agreement, and since this derives its force from natural Right, nature may be said to be its grandmother'.<sup>88</sup> Although the familial analogy is a bit confusing, his point is simply that civil society emerges as a consequence of our (created) social nature rather than self-interest.

With self-interest removed from its central role in the institution of political obligation, Grotius is free to locate that obligation in God. He says,

In former times it was commonly believed that each person had over his own life the same right which he had over other things that come under ownership, and that this right, by tacit or expressed consent, passed from individuals to the state. ... But now that a truer knowledge has taught us that lordship over life is reserved for God, it follows that no one by his individual consent can give to another a right over life, either his own life, or that of a fellow citizen.<sup>89</sup>

Consent is not entirely removed from the picture, but it is rooted in God's reservation of "lordship over life".

This brief glimpse into Grotius' perspective reveals that adequate attentiveness to creation and the role of covenant in human nature can produce a more attractive account of political obligation. He also reveals the extent to which

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Ramsey by attempting to reconstruct the social-historical situation in which several of the just war theorists thought and wrote' (115).

<sup>88</sup> Grotius, 'The Right of War and Peace', 795. This selection is taken from the prolegomena, section sixteen. Ramsey's typed notes on *The Right of War and Peace* highlight these passages. See unpublished notes, Box 43, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>89</sup> Hugo Grotius, *De jure belli ac pacis libri tres*, trans. Francis W. Kelsey, Classics of International Law, no. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913-1925), 743. This passage is taken from chapter xi, section xviii, section I. I cite from the Kelsey edition here simply because the passage is not included in the selections in *From Irenaeus to Grotius*.

Ramsey could have highlighted the role of consent in political society without pinning it to the logic of the social contract. As with my previous criticism, Ramsey was not without the resources to make these connections. As early as 1946 he recognizes a tension between Rousseau and a Christian account of creation: ‘Genesis understands sin as sin *before God* and therefore apprehends it with intensity as an ultimate infraction ... Rousseau understands sin as sin *over man*’.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, as I noted at the start of this chapter, his doctoral research announces that Rousseau is a distracting influence on theological and philosophical attempts to understand moral obligation as rooted in the will of God.

He also recognizes in unpublished notes from the 1940s that the concept of covenant is capable of carrying such a theological load. He uses the prophet Nathan’s rebuke of David for Uriah’s death in 2 Samuel 12 to make this point, writing, ‘Nathan does not say that Uriah, Bathsheba’s wife (*sic*, husband), was one of the elders of the people with whom David covenanted, so that the people’s covenant has been broken. He says God’s covenant has been broken. Neither king’s will nor popular will but God’s will!’<sup>91</sup> Yet, even here he lacks the move toward a doctrine of creation as a way of connecting Israel as uniquely responsible to the covenant with Yahweh to the human community as accountable for obedience to God.

I have throughout this chapter restricted my sources to those composed in the 1940s and early 50s. This is because the influence of Karl Barth in the 50s leads Ramsey to reject the usefulness of social contract theory in political theology as ‘a

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<sup>90</sup> Ramsey, ‘A Theory of Democracy’, 256. Ramsey adds to his description of the constructive aspect of justice stemming from Yahweh as the transcendent source of moral obligation when he says, ‘biblical justice goes on to do more than Rousseau’s justice; or rather, biblical justice accomplishes at least this in the course of doing more’. *Basic Christian Ethics*, 348.

<sup>91</sup> Ramsey, unpublished notes, Box 42, Ramsey Papers. He says also that Israel’s covenant ‘differs from the secular theory of absolute sovereignty in that this sort of contract having been made between Israel and Yahweh, there is thereafter no possibility that any human voice or lawgiver can have such sovereignty in Israel’.

mistaken view of God's creation in man'.<sup>92</sup> He seizes upon the doctrine of creation and attacks Rousseau, noting that 'the idea of *covenant*-bond stands between or beyond the idea of *contract*' because 'the creation in him is in order to covenant'.<sup>93</sup>

Much later he moves even farther away from an appreciation of Rousseau's logic, writing in a letter to a doctoral student, 'I would never locate our "creation for covenant" in our wills alone; then I would be a contractarian ... 'we are born into political communities that are extant, unless you believe these really come about by contract'.<sup>94</sup>

These later developments, however, are reliant on his appropriation of Barth's doctrine of creation in *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*. He found in Barth a theological foundation capable of sustaining a constructive political ethic rooted in covenant. And it is to the task of understanding those developments that I now turn.

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<sup>92</sup> Ramsey, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, 31.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 36, 31.

<sup>94</sup> Paul Ramsey to Deborah Streeter, July 7, 1978, Box 24, Ramsey Papers.

## Chapter Five

### **Covenant, Creation and Politics: Ramsey's Use of Karl Barth's Doctrine of Creation as a Foundation for Political Ethics**

‘The saving distinction ought to be kept clear ... between creation and covenant,  
between the cohesions of any actual human community and the fact that we are and  
therefore are to become one in Christ’.<sup>1</sup>

– Paul Ramsey, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*

Speaking of the gradual release of volumes of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* throughout the 1950s and 60s, Ramsey writes late in his career, ‘I read every volume of Barth as those were issued in English translation, as soon as they came out! This was my summer's reading!’<sup>2</sup> The most important of those volumes for his theology of covenant was 1958's *Church Dogmatics* III/1, *The Doctrine of Creation*.<sup>3</sup> While he gestures at the importance of Barth in *Basic Christian Ethics*, it isn't until the 1961 publication of his second book, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, that he begins to fully incorporate Barth's systematic perspective into his political theology.

In this chapter I want to analyze Ramsey's use of *Dogmatics* III/1 for his account of the central role of covenant in Christian political ethics. What will be immediately apparent to readers familiar with Barth's theology is that he does not use III/1 in a way that Barth likely would have approved, nor in a way that is

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* (New York: Association Press, 1961), 59.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ramsey to David Attwood, December 8, 1984, Oliver O'Donovan personal collection.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, vol. III, 1 of *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance and trans. J.W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958).

compatible with the “special ethics” of *Dogmatics* III/4.<sup>4</sup> One of the central tasks of interpreting *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* is that of examining the unique features of his use of III/1 precisely because it simultaneously draws upon Barth and tends in a distinctly non-Barthian direction.<sup>5</sup> The substance of this claim should become clear in the forthcoming pages.

Given the tendentious nature of Ramsey’s reading of Barth, this chapter is oriented around two central questions. First, what is he doing when he adopts and adapts this theology of covenant and creation from *Dogmatics* III/1? To answer this question I will initially consider the essential features of Barth’s formula that “creation is the external basis of covenant and covenant is the internal basis of creation”. This will provide the foundation from which to launch an examination of the ways he alters Barth’s systematic account to explicitly engage the covenant/creation motif as a foundation for political morality.

The second question stretches beyond Ramsey’s explicit appropriation of Barth and delves more deeply into his political ethics by inquiring how his description of the *esse* and *bene esse* of politics (in *The Just War* and elsewhere) is reflective of his interaction with the creation/covenant motif.<sup>6</sup> This will facilitate a fresh interpretation of his use of III/1 by amending Oliver O’Donovan’s standard account of the relationship between Ramsey and Barth on politics. It will also

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, vol. III, 4 of *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance and trans. A.T. Mackay, T.H.L. Parker, H. Knight, H.A. Kennedy, J. Marks (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961).

<sup>5</sup> As David Attwood notes, ‘Barth’s concern is a wide and general one, and Ramsey borrowed his language in order to use it in social and political ethics in a way that Barth never did, and indeed would have resisted’. *Paul Ramsey’s Political Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1992), 22. See also Robin W. Lovin, ‘Covenantal Relationships and Political Legitimacy’, *The Journal of Religion* 60, no. 1 (1980): 2.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ramsey, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968; reprint, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1983).

establish a clear vision of the central role Barth plays in his use of covenant to capture the contingent and temporal features of political morality.

Before moving explicitly to the content of Barth's doctrine of creation, I want to offer a brief initial description of the scholarly and commercial reception of *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* in the early 1960s. There is a tendency to overlook its importance among Ramsey's political writings and attending to some of the details of its publication will help frame my attention to his adaptation of Barth. Perhaps more interestingly, however, it will help to paint a picture of him as a young scholar hoping to build upon the foundational theological work accomplished in *Basic Christian Ethics*.<sup>7</sup>

### 5.1 The Publication of *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*

In 1961 Association Press distributed numerous copies of *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* to reviewers in an attempt to piggyback on the previous success of *Basic Christian Ethics*, which sold quite well in the early fifties due to its usefulness as a course textbook in colleges and seminaries.<sup>8</sup> Several months after its release, however, James Best wrote to notify Ramsey that they had sold only 150 copies and that 'review-wise it has not yet been a spectacular success'.<sup>9</sup> Although by year's end over a thousand copies were sold, the second year of publication saw the distribution of only 184 copies. He barely made enough in royalties in total to cover his \$500 advance and ended up buying 100 of the remaining 1,000 books left in stock at the

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950).

<sup>8</sup> John C. Bennett, for instance, observed that the book 'immediately places [Ramsey] in the front rank of American theologians'. Review of *Basic Christian Ethics*, Box 33, The Paul Ramsey Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Perkins-Bostock Library, Duke University.

<sup>9</sup> James Best to Paul Ramsey, July 11, 1961, Box 33, Ramsey Papers.

close of 1964.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, *War and the Christian Conscience* (also released in 1961) had by the end of that year already outsold all of the other books in a series of publications from Duke University Press.<sup>11</sup>

Ramsey wrote *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* with high hopes for its success. He suggested the book for promotion by the Religious Book Club instead of *War and the Christian Conscience* because he felt the former was ‘not such heavy reading’.<sup>12</sup> Even when sales continued to falter he requested that a revised and enlarged edition be released with substantial amount of new material and rearranged chapters. He felt that it was important to provide ‘further extension of the conceptual analysis that was begun to be set forth in that book’.<sup>13</sup> The publishers offered a sympathetic but swift refusal, noting that the number of first edition copies remaining in stock would be sufficient to sustain the current rate of sales for several years.<sup>14</sup> Nine months later *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* was out of print.

Despite its woeful commercial success, in the early nineteen eighties when Ramsey reflects on his intellectual development, he appeals to Karl Barth as the one who provided ‘the major leap forward’ in his thinking about theological ethics.<sup>15</sup> That “leap” came in *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* by way of the formula in *Dogmatics* III/1 that covenant is the internal basis of creation and creation is the

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<sup>10</sup> For these figures see the published book file on *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, Box 33, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>11</sup> The publishers congratulated Ramsey, saying, ‘[*War and the Christian Conscience*] is selling very well ... I think you should be pleased, as we are, regarding the favorable attention it has received throughout the country’. See John Hallowell to Paul Ramsey, April 5, 1962, Box 33, Ramsey Papers. See Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961). The Religious Book Club featured *Basic Christian Ethics* in 1950.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ramsey to James Reitmulder, January 23, 1961, Box 1, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Ramsey to Stanley Stuber, January 30, 1964, Box 1, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Elfers to Paul Ramsey, February 18, 1964, Box 1, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘A Letter to James Gustafson’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 13 (1985): 74.

external basis of covenant. I now turn to address the role of that motif in Barth's development of his doctrine of creation.

## 5.2 Karl Barth's Doctrine of Creation in *Dogmatics III/1*

Barth arranges his discussion around exegesis of the creation stories of Genesis 1 – 2:4b and Genesis 2:4b – 25. He addresses the former under the heading, 'Creation as the External Basis of the Covenant'.<sup>16</sup> Here "external basis" expresses the view that the cosmos and the earth are formed by the creative action of the triune God as a place prepared to make possible the relationship between God and humankind.<sup>17</sup> "External basis" represents the structural framework and the physical substance that enable both human-human and human-divine relationships (including the reconciling work of Christ). As such, his doctrine of creation allows for no 'external presupposition' of creation; beyond creation there is only Trinity.<sup>18</sup>

He addresses the second creation story under the heading, 'The Covenant as the Internal Basis of Creation'.<sup>19</sup> "Internal basis" expresses the view that covenant is the purpose or driving force of creation because the covenant-love of the divine Creator precedes, sustains and eclipses the history of creation. He says,

The fact that covenant is the goal of creation is not something which is added later to the reality of the creature, as though the history of creation might equally have been succeeded by any other history. It already characterises creation itself and as such, and therefore the being and existence of the creature. The covenant whose history had still to commence was the covenant which, as the goal appointed for creation and the creature, made creation necessary and possible, and determined and limited the creature.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, III/1, 94.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 207-208.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 231.



Thus the internal character of creation – its nature and limitations, the ends placed before human society and the essence underlying humanity – is drawn from the covenant.

It is noteworthy that Barth draws upon Reformed covenant theology when he speaks of the history of the covenant as the covenant *of grace*. He rarely refers to the covenant in history, or the history of covenant, without calling it the covenant of grace, or simply *the* covenant. For him, history itself is embodied in the history of Israel such that she lives out what creation ascribes to humanity (that is, covenant).<sup>21</sup> He describes ‘the history of the covenant of grace instituted by God between Himself and man; the sequence of the events in which God concludes and executes this covenant with man, carrying it to its goal...’<sup>22</sup> The covenant of grace thus takes place *in* history and *in* time because the historical and temporal creation is the (external) sphere in which God has chosen to save his people.<sup>23</sup>

Three further observations concerning the external basis/internal basis motif will ease the transition into a discussion of Ramsey’s appropriation of the formula. First, Barth sustains an emphasis on the creature and creaturely well-being. Despite the narrative of disobedience in the opening chapters of Genesis, he is adamant that the creature is ‘destined, prepared and equipped to be a partner of this covenant’.<sup>24</sup> There are no aspects of the created existence – in his words, ‘no attributes, no conditions of existence, no substantial or accidental predicates of any kind’ – which are not formed for covenant with God in creation.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 238-239.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 66. See also Barth’s comments on the necessity of the temporality of history on page 72.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 96. See also page 230.

Second, he constantly reminds readers that the covenant driving creation also draws it toward its eschatological end.<sup>26</sup> There is no teleology for the creature outside of covenant with God – what unites Israel’s history with that of the cosmos is their shared eschatological end. There is a deep connection between *that which was* at the beginning of creation and *that which awaits* creation at its end. He does not mitigate the tension characteristic of time in created history, but he does affirm God’s love as that which sustains creation from start to finish.<sup>27</sup>

My third observation is slightly longer. While Barth demonstrates the inseparability of covenant and creation, he also maintains that they are not identical. He observes,

Creation is not itself the covenant. The existence and being of the one loved are not identical with the fact that it is loved. ... Nor is creation the inner basis of the covenant. ... The inner basis of the covenant is simply the free love of God, or more precisely the eternal covenant which God has decreed in Himself as the covenant of the Father with His Son as the Lord and Bearer of human nature ...<sup>28</sup>

There is an important distinction between creation and covenant that resembles the difference between the existence of the creature and the fact that the creature is loved. The creation-covenant formula thus *cannot be reversed* to read that covenant is the external basis of creation and creation is the internal basis of covenant. This is a reminder that existence and well-being are not identical and that the well-being of God’s creatures is constituted by “simply the free love of God”. To be created *for* covenant is one thing, to be *in* covenant, yet another.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 97. Creation places covenant not only at the beginning of all things but also at the end of all things. There is no teleology for the creature outside of covenant with God and covenant itself is the goal of creation. See also page 42.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 317. Around this time H. Richard Niebuhr makes a similar claim in ‘The Idea of Covenant and American Democracy’, *Church History* 23, no. 2 (1954): 130-132. Barth, unlike Niebuhr, repeatedly affirms that the goal of covenant is explicitly connected to Jesus Christ. See *The Doctrine of Creation*, III/1, 232.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 97. See also page 44.

Further comment on Barth's doctrine of creation will have to be suspended for now. This summary of his external basis/internal basis understanding of creation and covenant should be sufficient to consider the differences between his doctrine and Ramsey's political theology. As such, I will now reflect on the ways Ramsey adopts and adapts this understanding of creation and covenant.

### 5.3 Ramsey's Adaptation of the Creation/Covenant Formula

After reading *Dogmatics* III/1 in 1958, Ramsey wrote a piece for the Clarence D. Ashley Lectures on Law and Theology at New York University School of Law.

He wrote there,

If man is created for Exodus, it should not be surprising if there is present among the utterances of his created nature an echo of his call into covenant ... As Karl Barth might put the point that has to be made: natural justice or the requirements made known to us through fundamental inclination or disinclination are the external or natural basis, the precondition, and the possibility of Exodus into covenant; while covenant-righteousness is the internal basis, the true meaning and the final purpose of whatever utterances of essential human nature may be produced in man's intellect as he seeks to know the good.<sup>29</sup>

This is his first mention of the formula, though it was not published until 1962 in *Nine Modern Moralists*. His more substantial engagement came, however, in 1961's *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*.<sup>30</sup>

I mentioned above that Ramsey does not use *Dogmatics* III/1 in a way that Barth likely would have approved, nor in a way that is compatible with the special ethics of *Dogmatics* III/4.<sup>31</sup> For this reason William Werpehowski notes that he has

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<sup>29</sup> Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 244.

<sup>30</sup> William Werpehowski rightly observes the fact that *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, despite the later publication date, addresses problems that emerged in several chapters in *Nine Modern Moralists*.

'Christian Love and Covenant Faithfulness', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 19, no. 2 (1991): 128-129.

<sup>31</sup> Of course, III/4 was not available in English in 1958, but my point is not that Ramsey should have used III/4, only that his use of III/1 goes in a different direction.

‘his own purposes’ in the appropriation of Barth.<sup>32</sup> David Attwood adds that his ‘application of the idea was not in the direction Barth intended’.<sup>33</sup> While these observations are certainly accurate, Ramsey also never presumes that his position will remain wholly within the Barthian framework. Rather, as an unpublished piece in the Paul Ramsey Papers indicates, he feels that too many Reformed thinkers are afraid to ‘wrestle with [Barth] for insight’ in the realm of ethics, having deepened their ‘knowledge into God which his theology yields’.<sup>34</sup>

In *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* his wrestle with Barth produces the assertion that ‘an analysis of “natural” justice on the basis of covenant-creation is imperative *even for a Barthian theological ethics*’.<sup>35</sup> This stems from his unhappiness with the perception that ‘guidance for the political order’ can easily be derived from ‘church law’ or ‘the human law developed within the community of believers’.<sup>36</sup> He seeks an account of how ‘creation-covenant may provide criteria for this movement of secular law from worse to better’ and charges theological ethics with the task of establishing these criteria.<sup>37</sup>

Here, of course, in using creation and covenant to move the social order from worse to better, is the Ramseyian transformist ethic closely aligned with H. Richard Niebuhr’s fifth type of Christ-transforming-culture. But we should not let this distract us from the fact that a call for closer attention to the structures of the moral life is also a common theme in his interpretations of Barth. In *Nine Modern*

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<sup>32</sup> William Werpehowski, *American Protestant Ethics and the Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 38. He also rightly notes that ‘Ramsey was willing to speak generally of his adoption of “Barth’s formula”, but he failed in the course of his special ethics to refer his readers to it’. ‘Christian Love’, 127.

<sup>33</sup> Attwood, *Paul Ramsey’s Political Ethics*, 19.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Ramsey, Review of *Right to Life*, undated, Box 25, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>35</sup> Ramsey, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, 23n, emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

*Moralists* he is concerned that ‘there may be a danger that some who follow Barth’s lead will fail to elaborate fully a doctrine of man or to articulate an ethic which results from the proclamation of the gospel’.<sup>38</sup> As late as the 1980s in ‘Liturgy and Ethics’ he still maintains that ‘Barth will have nothing to do with legal righteousness, but anyone who supposes that this means the Christian life is structureless simply has not read him’.<sup>39</sup> He thus takes Barth’s doctrine of creation as a source for identifying moral structures that constitute and shape our public lives.

Already in the quotation highlighted above from *Nine Modern Moralists* he speaks of ‘natural justice’ as something to be derived from a theology of creation and covenant.<sup>40</sup> In *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* he again develops a (distinctly non-Barthian) account of natural justice, as well as one of political order. Together they mark the two most significant features of his adaptations of the creation/covenant formula. I will address both concepts, beginning with natural justice.

The roots of justice for Ramsey lie in the positive function of covenant working in creation to determine norms of equity and desert in nature and in political institutions.<sup>41</sup> Justice brings humanity together in right relation and equitable arrangements, thereby creating the conditions for the possibility of charitable and loving action. It bears ‘the external marks of man’s destiny for steadfast covenant love. It provides only the external possibility of covenant’.<sup>42</sup> This means that the work of covenant as the internal basis of creation produces an element of justice in the natural created order.

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<sup>38</sup> Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists*, 36. He expresses concerns that Barth’s rejection of independent anthropological claims (i.e., non-Christological accounts of human nature), will mistakenly abandon anthropology altogether (and therein deprive ethics of key philosophical and theological resources).

<sup>39</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘Liturgy and Ethics’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7, no. 2 (1979): 144.

<sup>40</sup> Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists*, 244.

<sup>41</sup> Ramsey, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, 25-26.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

As the external basis of covenant, natural justice is also the external basis of the work of Christian love. The unity of charity and justice is rooted in creation and found in ‘the goal toward which we are being redeemed’.<sup>43</sup> He uses Micah 6 to explain justice as the positive moral function of covenant, saying,

The state and its law as an ordinance of creation, natural justice, human and legal rights, and social institutions generally, so far as these have a positive purpose under the creative, governing, and preserving purposes of God— all are the external basis making possible the actualization of the promise of covenant; while covenant or fellow humanity is the internal basis and meaning of every right, true justice, or law. This enables us to see why the requirements of charity, or of steadfast covenant-love, and the requirements of justice, or of natural right, are ultimately inseverable. Each conditions the other, and we are told that what is required of us is only to do justice [the justice that provides an in-principled expression of divine charity or gives external basis for or promise of, or prepares in the desert a highway for God’s mercy] and to love mercy [the mercy that determinately fashions our human justice] and to walk humbly in covenant with God.<sup>44</sup>

He employs the external basis/internal basis formula to establish natural justice as the work of covenant love at creation. In this way the meaning of justice is ‘resting upon the foundation of the created order’ and, at the same time, ‘the promise and pledge or the possibility of covenant-love’.<sup>45</sup>

If natural justice is the positive function of covenant love working in creation, political order serves the negative function of restraining sin. Ramsey asserts that ‘broken covenants cause disorder, which ‘can destroy ... the presuppositions and external basis of covenant’.<sup>46</sup> Thus, ‘the Christian understanding of the fallen creation and its *always already* broken covenants gives the justification for a regard

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 49. Charles Harris comments, ‘Ramsey argues that in order for men to exist in any higher relationship with one another – e.g. that of charity – there must be certain conditions which are the “external” basis of the higher relationships. Among these conditions is the institution of natural justice in which each man is given his exact due and regarded as an equal in an abstract sense with every other man before the law. Such justice is necessary in order for men to relate in any higher and more peculiarly Christian way’. Charles E. Harris, ‘Love as the Basic Moral Principle in Paul Ramsey’s Ethics’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 4, no. 2 (1976): 245-246.

<sup>44</sup> Ramsey, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, 25-26.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 99, 30.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 51.

for order as well as for justice'.<sup>47</sup> The responsibility of the state for supplying political order in a world of repeatedly broken covenants is to make possible 'man's life in community'.<sup>48</sup> Thus, it is not merely natural justice, but 'the political order with its justice and its law ... [which] are the external basis, the promise, the possibility and capability for covenant-community'.<sup>49</sup> Because the state is 'a body composed of covenant relations', it is responsible for maintaining the external possibility of those relations through political order.<sup>50</sup>

### 5.3.1 Three Ways Ramsey Remains within Barth's Thinking

In spite of the tendentious approach, I want to suggest three ways that Ramsey's political themes are faithful to Barth's line of thinking in III/1. After all, the external basis/internal basis motif is, however dimly, still recognizable in Ramsey's hands and the ways in which he is faithful to Barth are worth mentioning for what they reveal about his political ethics. First, his shift into political ethics retains Barth's emphasis on eschatology. He warns against abstracting from the world and losing 'the capacity to be undergoing change by creation-covenant in which and toward which we live and by the ultimate reality of the church and the Spirit of Christ'.<sup>51</sup> That capacity rests upon the distinction (and tension) between

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., xiii-xiv.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 18. His more formal distinctions between *lex*, *ordo* and *iustitia* are not established until *The Just War*. At this point he has not yet asserted that *lex* and *ordo* represent two aspects of order itself, the legal order and the order of power. *The Just War*, 11-12.

<sup>50</sup> Ramsey, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, 50.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 61. As Timothy P. Jackson says of his political ethics, 'Behind Ramsey's axiology lies his eschatology'. *The Priority of Love: Christian Charity and Social Justice* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 107.

what we are (creatures in a good but fallen creation) and what we are to become (creatures in eschatological covenant with God).<sup>52</sup>

At the opening of the previous chapter I noted Ramsey's early dissatisfaction with Rousseau's attempt to root moral obligation in the movement from what the self is to what the self wants to be. He suggested instead that only divine will could determine the moral good toward which we move. Here Barth's eschatology gives him the theological resources to describe the space between what we are and what we are to become – he says, 'the saving distinction ought to be kept clear ... between creation and covenant, between the cohesions of any actual human community and the fact that we are and therefore are to become one in Christ'.<sup>53</sup> It is a "saving" distinction precisely because it describes the eschatological tension of our lives and our ultimate end in covenant with God. At the same time it upholds the significance of the moral good by pointing to the fact that we are not yet at the goal for which we are destined.

Second, Ramsey's claim that political and ethical judgments take place in history distinctly resembles Barth's assertion that all covenants are historical covenants. This is most frequently expressed in his repetition of the idea that it is, after all, 'in this world, and not some other, covenant must be enacted'.<sup>54</sup> His account of humanity is such that 'God who created me ... at the same time gave me a nature in the form of fellow humanity in the historical time and space of my existence in

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<sup>52</sup> Ramsey, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, 59.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. It is the distinction between 'a formal condition of relationship from its realization'. Werpehowski, *American Protestant Ethics*, 41. For comments on the way this concept functions in Ramsey's reproductive ethics see pages 41-42.

<sup>54</sup> Ramsey, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, 102.



covenant'.<sup>55</sup> Although he drops the phrase "covenant of grace", he sustains the deep Barthian relation between covenant, history and time.

Finally, Ramsey faithfully reflects Barth's idea that covenant and creation are connected, yet not identical. He notes, 'the justice we know is still not the same thing as love – just as nature is not grace or grace nature, and creation is not covenant nor covenant the same as creation'.<sup>56</sup> This preserves Barth's notion that the formula cannot be reversed; as noted earlier, beyond creation is only Trinity. It also safeguards the sovereignty of God and therein the distinction between divine love and creaturely faithfulness. Ramsey adopts Barth's insistence that the external marks of the covenant cannot be equated with the covenant itself. To be created for covenant is one thing, to be in covenant, another.

#### **5.4 The Origin of the *Esse* and *Bene Esse* in Ramsey's Political Theology**

At this point, I have established the initial elements of Ramsey's adoption and adaptation of Barth's doctrine of creation. I have also demonstrated his use of the external basis/internal basis motif as the foundation of central political concepts of natural justice and political order. With this in place, it is now appropriate to consider my suggestion that he develops the central doctrine of his political theology– the *esse/bene esse* construction – out of Barth's external basis/internal basis motif.

Just three years after the publication of *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* he publishes his most comprehensive statement of political theory: 'The Uses of

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 37-38.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 127.

Power'.<sup>57</sup> Two excerpts from this essay will prove illuminating for my insistence on the foundational character of the external basis/internal basis structure for his political theology. First, he declares,

The proposition that the use of power, and possibly the use of force, belongs to the *esse* of politics (its *act of being*) and is inseparable from the *bene esse* of politics (its *proper act of being*, or its act of being *proper* politics) is denied by two views of the state, or of political community.<sup>58</sup>

He adds later,

Power, which is of the *esse* of political agency, may be a conditional value only; but order and justice, which are ever in tension yet in inter-relation, both are values that comprise the well-being, the *bene esse*, of political affairs and the common good which is the goal of political action.<sup>59</sup>

The idea set forth – that there is a political *act of being* which is distinct from yet inseparable from politics' *proper act of being* – reflects the formulations witnessed in Barth's distinction between what it is to be human (created) and what it is to be properly human (i.e., to be in covenant with God).

Now, surely there is quite a difference between the *esse* of the creature that Barth describes and the *esse* of political agency that Ramsey describes. There is also a difference between what it is for a human to be a human and what it is for a state to be a state, or a magistrate to be a magistrate. Yet, just as he adopts the external basis/internal basis formula in *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* to reinforce his understanding of natural justice and political order, here he takes up that same structure to reinforce his *esse/bene esse* understanding of the relationship between power and politics.

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<sup>57</sup> Paul Ramsey, 'The Uses of Power', *Perkins Journal* 18, no. 1 (1964): 13-24. It is reprinted as the headlining essay of *The Just War*, 3-18. He later calls this his 'normative conception of politics'. Paul Ramsey, 'Some Rejoinders', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 4, no. 2 (1976): 205.

<sup>58</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 5.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

It is a common misinterpretation of the claims excerpted above to believe that Ramsey understands the essence of political agency as simply the exercise of force. But notice the important technical (and provisional) function of power in his account. Power itself is not the *bene esse* of politics – that belongs to the ‘terminal goals’ of order and justice.<sup>60</sup> But power is the medium by which the political agent moves the community with purpose toward that good. Thus, Ramsey insists that ‘a political action is always an exercise of power and an exercise of purpose. Power without purpose and purpose without power are both equally nonpolitical’.<sup>61</sup> The purposive exercise of power is the currency of moral political progress.

I mentioned earlier that Barth’s attention to eschatology provides Ramsey with the theological resources to describe our capacity for moral transformation. It rests upon the distinction (and tension) between what we are (creatures in a good but fallen creation) and what we are to become (creatures in eschatological covenant with God). That same structure is here driving his emphasis on the technical (and provisional) function of power as that which connects the *esse* and *bene esse* of the political realm. At the same time it draws attention to the good end to which creation (and therein the political realm) is ultimately destined: the unity of charity, order and justice. I submit that Ramsey’s political distinction between the *esse* and the *bene esse* is clearly developed out of his interaction with Barth’s doctrine of creation and his ethical appropriation and adaptation of the external basis/internal basis motif in *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*.

What I have shielded from the reader’s view until this point – and what obscures this connection between Ramsey’s view of politics and Barth’s doctrine of

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 8.

creation in secondary literature – is that in the first of the quotations I highlighted above one of the two “views of the state” that he describes as neglecting this proper view of politics is *the political ethics of Karl Barth*. I mentioned previously that it is noteworthy that Ramsey used *Dogmatics* III/1 to reinforce his political theology rather than III/4. ‘Uses of Power’ uncovers the reason for that turn by revealing several criticisms of the special ethics of III/4.<sup>62</sup> To understand Ramsey’s criticisms of Barth and to better understand the importance of the differences between their theological views of politics, however, I must introduce Oliver O’Donovan’s extended commentary on Barth’s political ethics and Ramsey’s ‘Uses of Power’.<sup>63</sup>

### **5.5 Engaging Oliver O’Donovan’s Account of Barth and Ramsey’s ‘Uses of Power’**

O’Donovan’s essay, on the whole, makes three points about Ramsey and Barth on the basis of their understanding of the uses of power in politics. First, he notes that Ramsey’s two significant criticisms (in ‘The Case of the Curious Exception’ and in ‘The Uses of Power’) wrongly characterize Barth’s political ethics.<sup>64</sup> Second, he seeks to demonstrate that Barth’s ethics abnormalize the use of power for political authority and that this move is related to a ‘general intellectual

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<sup>62</sup> Of course, I am not claiming that in *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* he prefers III/1 to III/4. As noted above, III/4 was not translated into English until after 1961. My point here is more generally that the influence of III/1 continued to shape and drive his political ethics even as his later work voiced criticisms of III/4.

<sup>63</sup> Oliver O’Donovan, ‘Karl Barth and Ramsey’s “Uses of Power”’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 19, no. 2 (1991): 1-30. This essay is reprinted in Oliver O’Donovan, ‘Karl Barth and Paul Ramsey’s “Uses of Power”’, in *Bonds of Imperfection*, ed. Oliver O’Donovan and Joan Lockwood O’Donovan (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 246-275. I will cite from the *Journal of Religious Ethics* edition.

<sup>64</sup> O’Donovan, ‘Karl Barth’, 7. See also Paul Ramsey, ‘The Case of the Curious Exception’, in *Norm and Context in Christian Ethics*, ed. Gene H. Outka and Paul Ramsey (London: SCM Press, 1968), 69.

matrix' of the contractarian theory of John Locke.<sup>65</sup> Third, he argues that Ramsey's account of the *esse* and the *bene esse* of politics offers an alternative to the Barthian theological perspective on politics via a return to 'the Just War theory of Christendom'.<sup>66</sup>

On O'Donovan's first point he is correct that Ramsey mischaracterizes Barth's ethics by mistakenly associating his Christological rooting of the state with collapsed eschatological perfectionism. Barth was not the only person he falsely accused of eschatological perfectionism – it was one of his favorite lines of attack. Both *Who Speaks for the Church* and *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism* are grounded in a rejection of the same problem.<sup>67</sup> As with the question of his use of III/1, my intention is not to defend Barth against Ramsey's distortions but to ask what can be learned from them. I will leave to Barthian scholars the task of defending him against those misguided attacks.

To take up O'Donovan's second point regarding Barth's indebtedness to the Lockean intellectual tradition would be to stray too far from the discussion at hand. Accordingly, I will abstain from offering any judgment on that matter. For the purposes of this argument the stimulating aspect of the essay comes by way of his third point: the identification of Ramsey's *esse* and *bene esse* construction with the just war theory of Christendom.

I want to begin by considering his commentary on Barth and the use of power as abnormal. O'Donovan describes the way in which Barth locates the state Christologically by observing 'the proper location of the political order within the

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<sup>65</sup> O'Donovan, 'Karl Barth', 20.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> See Paul Ramsey, *Who Speaks for the Church? A Critique of the 1966 Geneva Conference on Church and Society* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1967) and *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988).

covenant of reconciliation between God and man'.<sup>68</sup> While this Christological root affords a positive account of the work of the state, Barth does not affirm in Christ any "natural substrata" or "orders of creation". Indeed, it is this lack which makes Ramsey's appropriation of Barth's doctrine of creation seem so far afield from Barth's own political ethics. For O'Donovan, however, this absence means that 'much in Barth's political ethics bears a distinctly Christian stamp *in fact*, and Barth certain has an *idea* of a Christian political ethics. But his is a distinctly Christian idea of political ethics, not an idea of a distinctly Christian political ethics'.<sup>69</sup> This point is significant, if obscure, so allow me a brief attempt at explaining what I take him to mean.

Both Ramsey and Barth operate within what O'Donovan calls a 'generally Augustinian' notion of the 'ambiguity of all political right'.<sup>70</sup> Ramsey harnesses this ambiguity by describing it as reflective of the tension which characterizes the pre-eschatological struggle of fallen creation. Christ has revealed not only the eschatological peace (and justice) to which creation is being drawn but also the irrevocable rootedness of the now fallen creation in his covenant-love. Political action is given Christian purpose only when it embraces the ambiguity of the in-between times by acting decisively in the direction of the *bene esse*. As David Smith observes, 'Ramsey claims that it is the intentionality of the act, what is "directly done", that is decisive amid the ambiguity'.<sup>71</sup> Creation, natural justice and political order are the external bases (the *esse* of politics) which make possible Christian

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<sup>68</sup> O'Donovan, 'Karl Barth', 4.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 5. For instance, Ramsey says, 'There are only relatively unjust peaces and justices composed of tempered fratricide. Augustine knew this'. See 'A New Understanding of National Security', Box 39, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>71</sup> David H. Smith, 'Paul Ramsey, Love and Killing', in *Love and Society*, ed., James T. Johnson and David H. Smith (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 15.

pursuit of covenant-love, peace, order and justice (the *bene esse* of politics). Only when the Spirit of Christ sustains created existence in this in-between time can the ambiguity of politics be harnessed with Christian purpose – with a Christian political ethic. For Ramsey the ambiguity of politics is itself a witness to the kingdom of God because it makes possible faithfulness to that kingdom.

Here comments from his 1972 essay ‘Force and Political Responsibility’ make clear how acts of political judgment both depend on systemic ambiguity and witness to the kingdom of God. He says

In their capacities as ‘magistrates’ men exercise creative rulership. Political decision and action is in *the image of God*, who also rules by particular decrees. God does not create a world in general; he creates a specific world out of myriad possibilities that might have been. ... The political act calls the things that are to be into being from things that are not. ... For all the doctrine and the policy research that went before, a statesman shapes events by decisions or indecisions that go beyond doctrine, that launch out into the unknown and the not-yet, and that do not pop out of research, game playing, or systems analysis. A statesman must actualize what is to be from among a number of legitimate choices, each of which is plausible before the event. He has the high and lonely responsibility of choosing what shall actually be done from among a number of possibilities, any of which might have been.<sup>72</sup>

Just as God creates a specific world – one in which we are particular and contingent creatures – so, too, does the magistrate act with judgment in a world of political ambiguities and endless possibilities. Certainly this does not mean that all such judgments are right and good. Rather, it demonstrates how the indeterminacy of our political existence makes possible faithful obedience to a God who also rules with particularity in a contingent world.

What this should make clear is that Ramsey’s insistence on the provisional union of power and purpose in moral political agency relies on a prior theological account of systemic ambiguity in human relations. Barth, on the other hand, uses that

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<sup>72</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘Force and Political Responsibility’, in *Ethics and World Politics: Four Perspectives*, ed., Ernest W. Lefever (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 47.

ambiguity to fuel a “reservation” in the way that the state witnesses to the kingdom of God. Rather than embracing the ambiguity of all political right (and therein the intimate connection between power and political purpose), Barth seeks an account of the normal function of the state which marginalizes power and ambiguity. As O’Donovan observes, ‘For Ramsey power is *always* suspect and *always* necessary, while Barth considers it *usually* suspect and *occasionally* necessary’.<sup>73</sup> Barth seeks to ‘locate a different ground on which a “normal” politics can function without having to incur the perpetual self-affliction of those who think that they must put to death, but know that they cannot raise from the dead’.<sup>74</sup>

Rooting the normal function of the state (but not the abnormal use of power) in Christ severs the ambiguity of politics – the perpetual self-affliction – from Christian purpose. Barth’s ‘dialectic between the normal, central functions of the state and its marginal, occasional function’ lacks the sense of Christological purpose in political action aimed at the *bene esse*.<sup>75</sup> Thus, O’Donovan says, ‘it is always the *esse* of politics that is in [Barth’s] view, not a Christian *bene esse* that might have to correspond to some *esse* that lay behind and before it’.<sup>76</sup> In light of this analysis of both thinkers on the ambiguity of political right, O’Donovan’s claim that Barth has a Christian idea of political ethics but not an idea of Christian political ethics becomes clearer. I take him to mean that while he can see how Barth links the normal function of the state to Christ, he cannot see how it contains the possibility of political action imbued with distinctly Christian purpose. Ramsey’s embrace of the ambiguity of

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<sup>73</sup> O’Donovan, ‘Karl Barth’, 20. For one example of Ramsey’s thinking here, note when he says ‘At least we could find that order, justice and peace are joined by cords not lightly (or likely) to be broken, ... order is always imperfect but always basic’. See Ramsey, ‘A New Understanding’.

<sup>74</sup> O’Donovan, ‘Karl Barth’, 6.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 12.



politics as characteristic of the tension between the *esse* and the transcendent *bene esse*, on the other hand, contains precisely the foundation of such purpose.

### 5.6 Ramsey's Uses of Power and the Just War Theory of Christendom

Ramsey and Barth share a commitment to the Christological center of political thought – indeed, Ramsey was constantly defending himself on this point. Their divergence stems from the fact that he embraces the ambiguity of political endeavors rather than turning away from it. Political authority is both unfulfilled and provisional fulfilment because of the ambiguous way it corresponds to the authority of Christ. As O'Donovan says, 'Ramsey so repeatedly asserts that earthly politics belongs in *unfulfilled* salvation-history ("this side the ploughshares") that it is too easy to miss the obvious: politics construed in terms of *lex*, *ordo* and *iustitia* is a fruit of that *provisional fulfilment* which is given us in the advent of Jesus Christ'.<sup>77</sup> The Christological root of political authority is why the ethics governing political judgment are defined by Christian charity rather than a purely "natural" account of self-defence. Ironically, it is Ramsey (not Barth) who endorses the idea of "natural" justice while at the same time advocating a political ethics more directly infused with a distinctive sense of Christian purpose.

O'Donovan explains, and I agree with him on this point, that Ramsey's *esse* and *bene esse* offer precisely what Barth lacks, 'the evangelical interpretation of politics ... so that the *homo politicus* that is redeemed is recognizably the same *homo politicus* in need of redemption'.<sup>78</sup> Yet, he also believes that Ramsey leaves his

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 14. Another way of saying this, for O'Donovan, is that Barth lacks a 'political analogue to the *homo assumptus*' of the Incarnation. He says, 'this is what Barth is not ready to grant, in the political

reader without a complete account of the *esse* and *bene esse*. He says, ‘Ramsey has almost nothing to tell us about the *esse* of politics, other than that power is “of” it. Yet its role in his thought is important: it is a safeguard against Utopianism in our speculations on the *bene esse*’.<sup>79</sup> One aim of this discussion has been to show that Ramsey says quite a bit about the *esse* (and the *bene esse*) of politics – only not in ‘The Uses of Power’ but in *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*. In fact, he takes his cues in that discussion from Barth’s *Dogmatics* III/1.

As mentioned above, the roots of justice for Ramsey lie in the positive function of covenant working in creation to determine norms of equity and desert in nature and in political institutions. The power which is of the *esse* of politics is that which brings humanity together to create the possibility of charitably just and loving action; political order makes possible life in community. O’Donovan describes his position by noting that living well ‘must be described in terms consistent with simply “living”’.<sup>80</sup> *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* establishes precisely this concept by arguing that governing rightly must be consistent with simply governing. He seizes upon the theological resources in Barth’s doctrine of creation to articulate this interpretation of political agency and morality.

This at last makes us able to address O’Donovan’s assertion that Ramsey’s line of thinking on the theological interpretation of politics lies squarely within the just-war theory of Christendom. He traces the roots of Ramsey’s political ethics to ‘the Neo-Thomists and Grotius, and ... the implicit theory of Augustine and

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realm at least’ (16). I take this point to be what I have traced here through Barth and Ramsey: there is theological significance to the space between what we are and what we are to become.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

Aquinas'.<sup>81</sup> He links Barth, on the other hand, to a 'general intellectual matrix' of Lockean social contract theory; he takes Barth's abnormalization of coercion to be a reflection of deeper contractarian tendencies to over-estimate social institutions and elevate 'consent-politics'.<sup>82</sup>

The first response to such a claim, particularly in light of the previous chapter on Rousseau, is that Ramsey is entangled in his share of deeper contractarian tendencies to over-estimate social institutions and elevate consent-politics. His covenant/contract analogy breaks down precisely at points where Israel's faithful response to Yahweh cannot be made compatible with the central role of consent in the social contract. It also obscures several of his stronger misgivings about Rousseau's failure to root moral obligation in the transcendence of the divine will.

My second response has to do with O'Donovan's identification of the influences on Ramsey's theological interpretation of politics. In the previous chapter I began to acknowledge his debts to classical thinkers such as Grotius and Bodin. O'Donovan is certainly right that if forced to choose between Barth and Ramsey the latter more adequately reflects the justified war theory of Christendom. Yet, my gesture toward the potential value of Grotius' theories for Ramsey's political theory was just that: a gesture. Ramsey may fit squarely in the line of just war thinkers but he found his way there by way of substantial theological engagements with Barth, not Grotius. If my argument here is correct, the Barth of *Dogmatics* III/1 belongs, however awkwardly, among the list of significant figures who influence his vision of politics as constituted by an *esse* and a *bene esse*.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

Ironically, the link between Ramsey and Barth emerges through O'Donovan's suggestion that there were adequate resources within other sections of Barth's own work that he might have drawn on to account for the difference between an *esse* and a *bene esse* of Christian politics. He says, 'there was much in [Barth's] thought that could, and should, have taken him the other way. The *humanum* of Christ ... demonstrates that even the old humanity was never unnormed, but was claimed from the beginning – and, in the event, decisively claimed – by the God of the covenant'.<sup>83</sup> This points to the central role of Christ in the old humanity – and the *creation* of that old humanity – as that which was normed from the beginning yet in need of redemption. Ramsey builds his *esse/bene esse* distinction on precisely these Barthian themes.

It would certainly be accurate to read 'The Uses of Power' and think that Ramsey's political ethics are quite different from Barth's political ethics. That is not here in dispute. But if my argument is correct then it would be inaccurate to read 'The Uses of Power' and think that his political ethics are quite different from Barth's doctrine of creation. Rather, it is that doctrine of creation which informs from an early stage his central political concepts.

### **5.7 Covenant as a Theological Foundation for Understanding the Contingency and Temporality of Politics**

I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis that reading Ramsey as a political theologian means grasping the theological significance of contingency and temporality. We live not merely in historical time, but in a particular historical time

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

between creation and eschaton. Similarly, the indeterminacy of political pursuits is not merely an incidental defect in human existence but the gift of a good Creator enabling the possibility of faithful creaturely response. This chapter demonstrates that his theological rationale for these aspects of political existence comes by way of his understanding of the concept of covenant. He describes the function of the political state as both the external basis for the possibility of covenants and as a sort of ‘organized covenant’ itself.<sup>84</sup> In this way political authority must keep in mind what Ramsey calls ‘man with man’ (justice) and ‘man for man’ (charity).<sup>85</sup> He charges the state both with ensuring that the political community continues to exist (*esse*) and with the pursuit of covenant-defined aims to which the political community is ultimately ordered (*bene esse*). The tension of these two aims represents and reflects the tension of historical time between creation and eschaton.

Although he does not explicitly use the language of covenant in the following example, I believe that it demonstrates what Ramsey takes to be the importance of his theological perspective for the identification of the *esse* and *bene esse* of politics. In an unpublished essay titled ‘A New Understanding of National Security’, he argues against a false view of national security (again, rooted in eschatological perfectionism) which results in ‘an entire reversal of the esse and the bene esse of politics’.<sup>86</sup> He attributes the reversal and the subsequent misunderstanding of national security to ‘a theological mistake’. The mistake is to assume that ‘the theological basis for a new context of national security, can be obtained only by a dissolution of the necessities and purposes of statecraft’.<sup>87</sup> Taking “necessities and

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<sup>84</sup> Ramsey, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, 50.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>86</sup> Ramsey, ‘A New Understanding’.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

purposes” to represent the *esse/bene esse* balance of political morality, he explicitly notes that a proper understanding of the political realm is essentially a matter of getting a hold of the right theology. He ties the false understanding of national security to ‘a denial of important features of the theological context in which Christian discussion of national security and other tasks of the state should proceed’.<sup>88</sup> Theology should not dissolve but uphold the proper role of political authority.

The aim of this thesis is to treat Ramsey as a political theologian and to take seriously his claims that the basic operations and structures of political action have fundamental theological significance. I have tried in this chapter to demonstrate that such a theological perspective for him begins with a right understanding of covenant and, more particularly, the relation between covenant and the doctrine of creation. Covenant is the theological perspective which funds a proper understanding of our contingent and temporal political lives.

Of course, one of the challenges to this reading is that his political ethics often fail to explicitly acknowledge these theological foundations. This is particularly true of his arguments on issues of moral theory and ecclesiology. The next chapter builds upon the interpretive gains of this chapter by demonstrating the common logic of covenant through which he addresses those topics.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Six

### **‘Jesus Did Not Tell the King the Conclusion He Should Reach’: Covenant, Moral Theory and Ramsey’s Ecclesiological Perspective on Politics**

This continues to be the acid that eats away at moral relations, and at the very idea that there are moral bonds between man and man, or between one moment and another.<sup>1</sup>

– Paul Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics*

In 1967 United International Press released an article by Louis Cassels on Ramsey’s newest book, *Who Speaks for the Church? A Critique of the 1966 Geneva Conference on Church and Society*.<sup>2</sup> The article ran in a number of papers across the United States and local editors were responsible for supplying their own titles for the piece. Albion, Michigan’s *Recorder* titled it ‘Ministers Should Not Just “Pop Off”’, while Youngstown, Ohio’s *Vindicator* offered ‘Churchmen Should Bite on Tongues’. Perhaps most pointedly, Bristol, Pennsylvania’s *Courier Times* advertised, ‘Advice to a Minister: You Talk Too Much’.<sup>3</sup>

Bowdlerizing titles of small-town papers were, however, the least of Ramsey’s troubles with the release of *Who Speaks*. Franklin Sherman suggested in *The Christian Century* that he could be called ‘the angry young man’ of Christian

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1967), 44. The title of this chapter is taken from Paul Ramsey, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968; reprint, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1983), 532.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Who Speaks for the Church? A Critique of the 1966 Geneva Conference on Church and Society* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> These articles are collected in the published book file for *Who Speaks for the Church?*, Box 25, The Paul Ramsey Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Perkins-Bostock Library, Duke University.

ethics and that the book was ‘annoyingly repetitious’.<sup>4</sup> Roger Shinn suggested that he replaced ‘the church militant with the church studious’ and D.L. Munby called it ‘too donnish and academic’.<sup>5</sup> Richard Johnson observed that ‘even Ramsey’s admirer’s must admit there is something a little “ivory tower” about his call for the Church to remove itself so completely from the arena of specific policy decisions’.<sup>6</sup>

What these newspaper titles and critical reviews reflect is that *Who Speaks* is at the same time a very straightforward yet obscure and difficult book. Ramsey is quite clear that he is displeased with the ecumenical pronouncements from the 1966 Geneva Conference of the World Council of Churches. On any given page the message “you talk too much” is inescapable. At the same time, his arguments are arduous and he fails to make clear the theological and systematic foundations upon which he calls for such a clear sense of limitation on ecumenical pronouncements. His target is so clearly in view – the specific political “directives” issued by the WCC conference – that it can be difficult to see how the project fits into his wider theological considerations of Christian political ethics.

The substance of *Who Speaks* is not explicitly doctrinal – as mentioned above, Ramsey shields his theological commitments behind argumentative engagements with the Geneva conference. Nonetheless, I believe that it marks an important continuation of his use of covenant as a theologically significant political theme. As detailed in the first two chapters of this section, there is a line of thinking that travels through Rousseau and Barth to yield an account of ethics as movement

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<sup>4</sup> Franklin Sherman, ‘Geneva Jeremiad’, *The Christian Century*, September 6, 1967, Box 25, Ramsey Papers, 1131.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Shinn is quoted in Henry Clark, ‘Out of the Vineyard, Back to the Big House: A Review Essay’. This review, as well as D.L. Munby’s ‘Review of *Who Speaks*’, appears in Box 25, Ramsey Papers

<sup>6</sup> Richard N. Johnson, ‘Ramsey’s Mirror’, *Unity Trends*, November 15, 1967, Box 25, Ramsey Papers, 13.



from the *esse* to the *bene esse* of politics. The argument of this chapter is that the same line of thought shapes and determines his insights into moral theory and, through moral theory, an ecclesiological perspective on the political realm.

Demonstrating the influence of his covenant theology on *Who Speaks* operates on two significant, if unexpected, presuppositions. First, I believe that the most adequate way to understand his elevation of decision-making as the central task of political authority and limitation of the church to the role of theoretician is to examine his wrestle with situation ethics in *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics*.<sup>7</sup> Only a careful examination of his anti-situationist moral theory makes clear the systematic and theological foundations of his arguments in *Who Speaks*. Second, I believe that this interpretive approach reveals that *Who Speaks* is the ecclesiological outworking of his political theology of covenant. That is to say, the limitations he places on the church have everything to do with his theological interpretation of politics as inescapably contingent, temporal and ordered to the transcendent *bene esse*.

This chapter will initially develop Ramsey's objections to "act-agapism" and situation ethics in *Deeds and Rules*. This identifies his emphasis on contingency and temporality as defining characteristics of moral (and political) agency. Subsequently, I take up the arguments in *Who Speaks* to address the contours of his strict limitations on ecumenical pronouncements and appreciation for the political authority and office of the magistrate. I suggest that his protection of the "magistrate's conscience" stems from those criticisms of situation ethics and his sensitivity to the role of properly framed and informed choice in political agency.

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<sup>7</sup> I will also keep in view Paul Ramsey, 'The Case of the Curious Exception', in *Norm and Context in Christian Ethics*, ed. Gene H. Outka and Paul Ramsey (London: SCM Press, 1968).

Finally, I argue that his description of the church as theoretician can be most adequately understood as a continuation of the covenant theological perspective on the structure and direction of political morality detailed over the last few chapters.

## 6.1 Temporal and Interpersonal Moral Bonds in Ramsey's Critique of Situationism

In the 1960s the adequacy of moral rules and principles for ethics came under fire from situation ethicists such as Joseph Fletcher and Paul Lehmann. Fletcher taught at Harvard Divinity School throughout that decade and his *Situation Ethics* was a seminal contribution to the debate.<sup>8</sup> Lehmann was a Presbyterian minister who studied with both Reinhold Niebuhr and Karl Barth and worked at Harvard and Union Theological Seminary until the 1970s. His *Ethics in a Christian Context* frustrated Ramsey for its failure to rightly understand the significance of covenant relations of life with life.<sup>9</sup> Ramsey initially contributed to the debate through selected essays, though he later arranged two book-length treatments of the subject.<sup>10</sup> The earliest of those was originally published in 1965 as an occasional paper for the *Scottish Journal of Theology*. A substantially enlarged version was released in 1967 – *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics*. His second treatment was an edited volume

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* (London: SCM, 1966).

<sup>9</sup> See especially Paul Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (London: SCM, 1963). Ramsey wrote in 1965, 'My quarrel with Paul Lehmann is not over any natural law norm of truth telling, but over what faithfulness, agape, covenant, require in this regard'. Paul Ramsey to Joseph Fletcher, June 29, 1965, Box 8, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Paul Ramsey, 'Lehmann's Contextual Ethics and the Problem of Truth-Telling', *Theology Today* 21, no. 4 (1965): 466-475; 'Two Concepts of General Rules in Christian Ethics', *Ethics* 76, no. 3 (1966): 192-207.

titled *Norm and Context in Christian Ethics* that included his essay ‘The Case of the Curious Exception’.<sup>11</sup>

I want to examine his response to situation and contextual ethics through his assertion that Christian ethics involves the determination of ‘love-embodiment’ moral rules.<sup>12</sup> He also calls these ‘rules of practices’ and insists that ‘an inquiry into the *meaning of practices* is of the utmost importance for the whole of Christian ethics’.<sup>13</sup> Before taking up his explicit criticisms, however, it is important to have a clear view of his appropriation of William Frankena’s distinction between ‘pure act-agapism’, ‘summary rule-agapism’, and ‘pure rule-agapism’.<sup>14</sup>

Pure act-agapism assesses the facts of each moral “situation” independently in such a way that ‘the facts of other similar situations, or generalizations drawn from such situations, or from previous moments of loving obedience, are simply irrelevant or misleading’.<sup>15</sup> Ramsey calls this situation ethics ‘in its purest form’.<sup>16</sup> Because pure act-agapism cannot appeal to general principles, rules, etc. (because they lie outside of the situation itself), the primary moral task is to identify the facts of each situation. He elsewhere describes this sort of reasoning as ‘the business of getting moral facts’.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Ramsey and Gene H. Outka, eds., *Norm and Context in Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968). Ramsey began with grand visions for the volume. He repeatedly pressed for a contribution from Reinhold Niebuhr, who declined, saying ‘I was not interested partly because I thought so little of Joe’s book; and partly because I am bored with emphasizing the whole Catholic tradition of Natural Law norms which Protestants should have taken more seriously long ago’. Reinhold Niebuhr to Paul Ramsey, May 26, 1966, Box 20, Ramsey Papers. Ramsey also invited John Rawls, who declined. John Rawls to Paul Ramsey, June 12, 1966, Box 20, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>12</sup> Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> William K. Frankena, ‘Love and Principle in Christian Ethics’, in *Faith and Philosophy*, ed. Alvin Plantinga (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 203-225. Ramsey was particularly concerned that the Frankena essay would not receive the attention it deserved because it was included in a Festschrift.

<sup>15</sup> Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules*, 106.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Ramsey, *Who Speaks*, 109.

Summary rule-agapism (or, modified act-agapism) is akin to pure act-agapism in that there can be no limits placed upon the working of agape in each individual situation. While certain ‘rules of conduct’ can be derived from ‘summaries of past experience’, such rules lack authority to restrict the freedom of love.<sup>18</sup> Summary-rule agapism fails to offer an improvement over pure-act agapism to the extent that summary rules serve only the limited function of ‘aids to love’.<sup>19</sup>

Against pure and modified forms of act-agapism, pure rule-agapism upholds the notion that each situation is to be governed by a set of rules. This makes the primary moral challenge not the determination of the most love-embodying action, but the most love-embodying rule.<sup>20</sup> While the criticisms most relevant for the following discussion are those directed at act-agapism, it is important to note that he has an additional set of arguments against pure-rule agapism as well.<sup>21</sup>

### 6.1.1 Objections to Act-Agapism

I want to consider carefully two explanations Ramsey sets forth for his disapproval of the “situational” approach to ethics in pure and modified act-agapism (and in the work of Fletcher and Lehmann). While speaking of two quotations from Frankena that he takes to be emblematic of situation ethics, he notes,

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<sup>18</sup> Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules*, 106.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 106-107.

<sup>21</sup> Readers looking for a more comprehensive analysis of *Deeds and Rules* or more explicit discussion of the role of principles in his moral theory should consult Paul F. Camenisch, ‘Paul Ramsey’s Task: Some Methodological Clarifications and Questions’, in *Love and Society: Essays in the Ethics of Paul Ramsey*, ed. David H. Smith and James T. Johnson (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 67-89; Donald Evans, ‘Paul Ramsey on Exceptionless Moral Rules’, in *Love and Society: Essays in the Ethics of Paul Ramsey*, ed. David H. Smith and James T. Johnson (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 19-46; James M. Gustafson, ‘Context Versus Principle: A Misplaced Debate in Christian Ethics’, *Harvard Theological Review* 58 (1965): 171-202; ‘How Does Love Reign?’, *The Christian Century* 83, no. 20 (1966): 654-655; Charles E. Harris, ‘Love as the Basic Moral Principle in Paul Ramsey’s Ethics’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 4 (1976): 239-258.

There is nothing wrong with any of these statements except their two silent, unexamined assumptions: (1) that Christian love has in itself no *breadth* to match its personal depth and therefore no rule-implying power, and (2) that love ‘homes in’ only upon *the moment* in the neighbor’s reality, for which it cares.<sup>22</sup>

Later, he says,

But for all that, the basic philosophy of act-agapism is drawn from no Christian source. It is drawn rather from the atomistic individualism of secular thought in the modern period. This continues to be the acid that eats away at moral relations, and at the very idea that there are moral bonds between man and man, or between one moment and another.<sup>23</sup>

Each rejection of act-agapism has two parts: a criticism of situation ethics’ ability to account for the moral aspects of human relations and an emphasis on the importance of the moment-to-moment character of such relations. Both parts require further explication.

His first complaint concerns the lack of “breadth”, or any recognition of the moral bonds between individuals. The emphasis on the facts of the individual situation in act-agapism may allow for “personal depth”, but it lacks a wider account of moral descriptions expanding beyond each specific situation. That is to say, in any particular situation it cannot account for the trans-situational moral claims arising out of human relations and interactions.

He identifies Rousseau as the model of this ‘ethic of atomistic acts in Christian clothing’.<sup>24</sup> He observes, ‘for Rousseau there can be no bond (but only bargains) between two contracting individuals because there can and should be no bond established between one atomistic moment of willing, or consenting, and the

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<sup>22</sup> Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules*, 23.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

next, and the next after that'.<sup>25</sup> Whereas Ramsey was once drawn to the role of consent in the social contract (see my discussion in chapter four), he now protests the protection of individual freedoms and elimination of moral bonds. Against this view he advocates an account of binding and morally significant human relations. As he says in 'The Case of the Curious Exception', 'in the Christian life we are driven deeper and deeper into the meaning of covenant obligations ... We are therefore driven ever deeper into the meaning of the bonds of life with life'.<sup>26</sup> Recognition of the moral significance of those bonds accounts for the breadth of Christian love.

His second criticism of act-agapism concerns temporal moral bonds. Ethics is a discipline that makes judgments across time and sustains notions of obligation and responsibility which extend beyond individual moments. Act-agapism and situation ethics fail because they 'can find no sustaining moral bond between the present moment of action and a later moment of action'.<sup>27</sup>

It is worth taking note of the significance of this emphasis in Ramsey's essay on Marxism in *Nine Modern Moralists*. There he expresses the inescapably temporal character of ethics by noting the importance of 'taking *time* seriously as a relation among creatures and the measure of the activity of creatures'.<sup>28</sup> He writes also that 'linear, temporal history and all the events that happen upon this plane have basic

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Ramsey says elsewhere that Christian ethics is 'mainly concerned about the requirements of loyalty to covenants among men, about the meaning of God's ordinances and mandates, about the estates and moral relations among men acknowledged to follow from His governing and righteous will, about steadfastness and faithfulness'. I take this also to demonstrate the link between these later developments and his early discussions of Yahweh's transcendence in covenant with Israel as a model for the moral norms of covenant governing human existence. Ramsey, 'Case of the Curious', 125.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules*, 45.

<sup>28</sup> Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 69. Ramsey continues, 'As long as there are creatures whose individuality and actions have ultimate significance, it will take time to be their measure, only time redeemed from the agony of unfulfillment' (69-70). The essay was originally published as 'Religious Aspects of Marxism', *Canadian Journal of Theology* 5, no. 3 (1959): 143-155.

significance'.<sup>29</sup> In *Deeds and Rules* this basic significance of actions in time means that they 'are in fact already morally joined together'.<sup>30</sup> Situation ethics neglects the temporal aspect of moral reflection by obscuring the relations 'between one moment and another'.<sup>31</sup>

Ramsey's fundamental points of contention concern the significance of interpersonal relations and the passage of time for a proper theological perspective on ethics. He says, 'it is of the very greatest importance that we understand the connection between the presence or absence of bonds or structures between man and man, and the presence or absence of bonds or structures relating one moment to another'.<sup>32</sup> Act-agapism fails on both points.

I mentioned at the conclusion of the previous chapter that the foundational emphasis on covenant in his political ethics produces an insistence on the theological significance of contingency and temporality. Barth's doctrine of creation enables him to argue that humanity lives not merely in historical time, but in a particular historical time between creation and eschaton; also that the contingency of political pursuits is not merely an incidental defect in human existence but the gift of a good Creator making faithful creaturely response possible. In this discussion of moral theory and situation ethics, he leaves behind the explicit theological warrants that drive his earlier comments. Yet, he squarely retains his insistence that an adequate understanding of ethics must take account of the necessary contours of human relations and the moral significance of time.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>30</sup> Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules*, 45.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 45.

### 6.1.2 Covenant Theology and the Problem of Choice

What is most significant about this discussion of situation ethics for the interpretation of *Who Speaks* is the way that Ramsey uses temporal and interpersonal moral bonds to sustain an emphasis on the role of choice in ethics. In order to understand what he means by “choice” we must first understand his claim that ‘to be born means to be born among practices’.<sup>33</sup> Practices are rule-governed activities, e.g., driving on the highway, playing a card game, or voting in an election. There is an important distinction, however, between ‘justifying a *practice* and justifying an action falling under it’.<sup>34</sup> For instance, the belief that voting is a morally justifiable rule-governed social practice in many countries does not automatically translate into the belief that all actual acts of vote-casting are morally justifiable. The difference between the “practice” and the “act” is an exercise of the will, or, what Ramsey calls ‘the production of a deed’.<sup>35</sup>

His claim that we are born among practices highlights the fact that we are surrounded (temporally and contingently) by rule-governed activities. The problem with situation ethics is that it strips away their role in the determination of right actions. It attempts to account for an exercise of the will without attending to the fact that ‘everywhere, and at all recorded times, practices preceded individual choice’.<sup>36</sup> Ramsey pulls the curtain back on situation ethics to reveal that its supreme interest in the particular moment voids all possibility of identifying resources (i.e., temporal

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 143-144.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 133. Ramsey takes this distinction from John Rawls. As mentioned above, Ramsey invited Rawls to contribute to this debate in *Norm and Context*. Eric Gregory notes that one of Rawls’ earliest publications was a review of *Basic Christian Ethics*. See ‘Before the Original Position: The Neo-Orthodox Theology of a Young John Rawls’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35, no. 2 (2007): 202.

<sup>35</sup> Ramsey, ‘Case of the Curious’, 106. He makes a similar distinction in the introduction to *Nine Modern Moralists*, saying that a particular generality ‘should perhaps be put aside as we try to study the elements that compose moral choice and action, as surely as both are put aside when we are in the actual process of arriving at practical conclusions’. *Nine Modern Moralists*, 3-4.

<sup>36</sup> Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules*, 144.



bonds and moral relations) for the particular choice required in that moment. He says that situation ethics ‘has therefore little or no light to shed upon any particular choice or upon the *problem of choice itself*. It does not tell us how to get on track (or do the good)’.<sup>37</sup> It simply cannot account for the world in which we find ourselves as moral agents.

The theological device Ramsey uses to represent the practices and moral relationships which constitute human existence and uphold the role of choice in morality is that of covenant. He rejects the adequacy of situational moral thinking by saying that it cannot account for ‘a sufficient interpretation of the covenants of life with life enacted and mandated by God’s covenant with men’.<sup>38</sup> Just as with his previous discussions, the theological foundation of covenant is inseparable from the doctrine of creation. He continues, ‘not so were we “enmeshed” when God created out of nothing his covenant folk, or when he saw that man was alone’.<sup>39</sup> The only adequate ground for moral obligation is one that accounts for the fact that we are “enmeshed” in relations with God and each other across time.

At this point he turns again to Barth as a theological resource. He notes ‘in Barth, the moral agent is bound, obliged; in [Joseph Fletcher’s situationism], he chooses, if he does, to be bound (which is to say he is not bound at all) ... But God stooped to the condition of the isolated and free moral agent. We are placed on notice that we can not and may not and must not be alone with the act *in situ*’.<sup>40</sup> Fletcher’s non-binding choice resembles Rousseau’s non-binding consent. In both cases Ramsey uses Barth to emphasize that choice is only intelligible in the presence of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 163. See also the comments on covenant, choice and agape in Marcia Sichol, *Making of a Nuclear Peace* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 32-34.

<sup>39</sup> Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules*, 163.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 63.

obligation. Thus, ‘only obligation can *oblige* one moment to be connected with another, or reliably forecast any route. ... Love must be able to adduce, produce, or discover these universal requirements’.<sup>41</sup> To translate: a workable social (and political) ethic relies on an account of obligation rooted in the “enmeshed” character of our created existence.

Ramsey upholds covenant theology at the base of his moral theory in his description of interpersonal and temporal relations as steadfast. He says, ‘There may be in our creation traces of our creation toward *steadfast* covenant, toward the image of Christ’.<sup>42</sup> This emphasis on the ‘forms of steadfastness in responsibility and accountability one to another’ is another attempt to sustain the moral importance of choice by transcending it with a sense of obligation rooted in covenant.

### 6.1.3 The Meaning of Choice

I have detailed Ramsey’s discussion of choice in *Deeds and Rules*, but I want to supplement that account with a few additional observations in order to get a clear view of his understanding of the term. The first comes by way of the opening section of this thesis on repentance. There I described his debate with David Little over the nature of political decision-making. He says in ‘Some Rejoinders’, ‘I would say prudence or practical wisdom is needed ... not “discretion” – which, as Little reads me, seems to mean arbitrary, baseless choice’.<sup>43</sup> It is important to keep in mind that “choice” in his moral and political theory is never simply an arbitrary exercise of the will.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘Some Rejoinders’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 4, no. 2 (1976): 206.

It is also significant that he frequently uses the language of prudence to capture the movement from practices to actions described in *Deeds and Rules* as choice. In 1961 Ramsey wrote in a letter to Byron Johnson that prudence ‘is not a derogatory word. ... It is “practical wisdom” in applying ethical principles to actual cases. Without prudence there would be no morality at all put forth into actual practice and decision-making’.<sup>44</sup> He says, later, that prudence ‘completes the ethical act by choosing’.<sup>45</sup> This locates the exercise of the will in proper relation to moral norms. He explains the relationship in *Nine Modern Moralists*, saying, ‘prudence, or practical wisdom in actual exercise, is always in the service of prior insight, conviction, or principle. Its function is the application in living action of something prior which governs our choices’.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the presence of governing moral norms is central to a proper understanding of choice.

Third, Ramsey occasionally uses the term “conscience” instead of choice or prudence. He says in an unpublished essay called ‘Living with Yourself’, ‘but when morality goes to pieces, man also goes to pieces. Man has no place, for conscience is his place. Displacing conscience, he himself becomes a displaced person, with no place from which his truth ... can be launched into life or into human discourse’.<sup>47</sup> He adds later, ‘If conscience is our place, men cannot live below or above

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<sup>44</sup> Paul Ramsey to Byron Johnson, February 17, 1961, Box 12, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. Paul Camenisch describes prudence as ‘those various capacities and functions of and demands upon the moral agent which come into play as he struggles to travel the distance between the ultimate norms, principles and rules he draws upon and the particular decision/action he alone can and must arrive at in a given instance’. ‘Paul Ramsey’s Task’ 85.

<sup>46</sup> Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists*, 5. Michael McKenzie explains the components of Ramsey’s concept of prudence understood in political agency. He says, ‘Prudence is defined by two characteristics. One, they must have a full *understanding* of just what politics is about – its limitations and expectations must both be looked at realistically. Two, they must have what I call an *informed* (or, better, *informable*) conscience. This is the ability to listen to the political *ethos* which – both good and bad – comes out of society’s moral underpinnings’. Michael C. McKenzie, *Paul Ramsey’s Ethics: The Power of ‘Agape’ in a Postmodern World* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 20.

<sup>47</sup> Ramsey, ‘Living with Yourself’, Box 38, Ramsey Papers.

conscience, below or above the distinction between good and evil, between truth and falsity. You will have to learn to live in the place of your conscience, since that is who you are’.<sup>48</sup> There is a legitimate place for choice in political theology because he understands that we cannot escape that element of human agency.

I suggest on the basis of these claims that what Ramsey means by “choice” might be more accurately described as “properly framed or informed choice”. Hopefully this will ease some of the fears of those who are concerned that his understanding of the term teeters too close to a neo-liberal, market-driven version of the word. Perhaps his most apt expression of this in political terms is his self description in the early 1980s of an ethicist ‘who happens not to believe that choice among alternative military policies can itself be deduced from just war criteria’.<sup>49</sup> Choice is to be properly informed and governed by the just war criteria, but it cannot be subsumed into the criteria themselves. Neither strict attention to the facts of any individual moment (situation ethics) nor emphasis on the inflexibility of transcendent norms (just war criteria) can be allowed to mitigate its role in political morality.

## 6.2 Who Speaks for the Church?: Ecumenism and Political Pronouncements

Now we turn to the task of interpreting *Who Speaks* in light of these developments in moral theory. Ramsey’s principal concern in that book is to reject the practice of offering specific policy advice to politicians in the name of the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. For additional comments on conscience see ‘Indeterminacy and Incommensurability in Moral Choice’ in *Doing Evil to Achieve Good: Moral Choice in Conflict Situations*, ed. Richard A. McCormick and Paul Ramsey (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1978), 85.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Ramsey to Ronald J. Sider, December 15, 1981, Box 25, Ramsey Papers. See also Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961), 190. Or, as William R. Stevenson Jr. observes, ‘the delineation of the moral limits on warfare “is the *context* for policy decision” and not the policy decision itself’. *Christian Love and Just War: Moral Paradox and Political Life in St. Augustine and His Modern Interpreters* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 130.

church. His criticisms are explicitly directed at the 1966 Geneva Conference's irresponsibility in issuing condemnations of US military intervention in Vietnam and possession of nuclear weaponry. He feels that 'there is no way to speak for the church ... and address particular prudential recommendations to the leaders of nations'.<sup>50</sup> The movement from particular issue to particular issue is 'trying to compile a Christian social ethic by leap-frogging from one problem to another'.<sup>51</sup>

Two consequences of this practice are especially important for this discussion. One is that the church blurs 'the distinction between itself and all other groups in the society'.<sup>52</sup> He feels that when the church pretends to offer specific political advice she joins the chorus of secular voices hoping to have their particular judgments mimicked by the political realm. Such ecumenical pronouncements are unsympathetically condemned as 'the most barefaced secular sectarianism and but a new form of culture-Christianity'.<sup>53</sup> His concern on this point is for the integrity and distinctiveness of the church in its witness to the political realm.

The other significant consequence of making specific recommendations is that the conscience of the magistrate is "faulted". While this term is somewhat obscure, he uses it to voice his concern that specific political pronouncements from ecumenical councils will deprive the office of the magistrate of its proper function in the determination of particular political judgments. He tries to capture this by speaking of 'two sorts of competence' in relation to moral political insight.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ramsey, *Who Speaks*, 34.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 54-55. He says elsewhere that they 'lack the shaping influence that should come from taking thought'. Paul Ramsey, 'The Status and Advancement of Theological Scholarship in America', *The Christian Scholar* 47, no. 1 (1964): 8.

<sup>54</sup> Ramsey, *Who Speaks*, 128.

I want to reflect upon these two objections in *Who Speaks* in light of the previous discussion of his moral theory in *Deeds and Rules*. First, I suggest that his rejection of situationism and promotion of interpersonal and temporal moral bonds provides a framework for understanding the inability of particular political pronouncements to sustain an adequate account of political authority. Second, I argue that his protection of the magistrate's conscience and assertion of two competencies is based upon his understanding of choice as central to moral political reasoning.

### 6.2.1 Situation Ethics and Ecumenical Pronouncements

Ecumenical pronouncements on specific policy initiatives mirror the inability of situationism to account for ethics from moment to moment and person to person. Just as situation ethics obscures the reality of practices shaping and governing moral existence, so also the 'bag of specifics' issued by ecumenical councils cannot be 'brought to bear upon the realities in the midst of which the statesman lives and must decide and act'.<sup>55</sup> He rejects the false assumption that increasing specificity and particularity in moral deliberation (whether of situations or policies) necessarily produces a more "realistic" perspective.

One problem with the "bag of specifics" mentality is its inability to account for a theologically informed understanding of Christ, creation and time. The phrase he uses to capture this inadequacy is "truncated Barthianism". He says, 'the revolutionary theology pervasive at the conference was, of course, a truncated Barthianism, stressing Christ and the revolutionary situation, lopping off Barth's own "prolongation" of his Christocentric ethics into a doctrine of man and of creation and

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

many a principle and structure'.<sup>56</sup> In this case, "prolongation" means a theological understanding of the work of Christ in creation and throughout history as opposed to limiting it only to the "revolutionary situation".

He calls truncated Barthianism 'a quite definite narrowing of the bases of ecumenical theology', because it organizes 'the Christian understanding of life and of politics under the second article of the Creed only (reducing the first, "creation", to the processes of historicized "nature" and the third to Christ's ever coming present triumph over the powers)'.<sup>57</sup> Instead, ecumenical statements should witness to the political realm by representing more fully the theological resources of the Christian tradition. The blunted theological character of specific pronouncements marks the difference between 'true prophecy' and 'the way to succeed as prophets without really trying'.<sup>58</sup> Of course, as one commentator notes, the call for greater attention to the role of doctrine in shaping ethics is 'like Mother's Day. Nobody is against it'.<sup>59</sup> The question is what is at stake in the loss of the theological breadth and depth of ecumenical pronouncements.

Ramsey's concern is principally with the integrity of the church, which it maintains by attending 'first of all ... to the business of Christian reflection upon all sorts and structures of human activity'.<sup>60</sup> Later, he provides a more substantial description of such reflection, saying,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 55, 38. See also Philip Turner, 'Social Advocacy as a Moral Issue in Itself', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 19, no. 2 (1991): 157-162. Turner says, 'the view, simply put, is that the job of the church in speaking on social issues is to be "prophetic" and that "being prophetic" means exposing what is misguided and immoral about present policy and then espousing *particular* policy alternatives which are frequently identified as *the* Christian options in respect to the issues at hand' (161).

<sup>59</sup> Paul Abrecht, 'Some Notes on the Book by Paul Ramsey, *Who Speaks for the Church*', July 26, 1967, Box 25, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>60</sup> Ramsey, *Who Speaks*, 109.

[Ecumenical pronouncements] should clarify the grounds on which government must rest. They ought to open wide the articulation of structural elements in that human reality which statesmanship must govern and the range of alternatives it is legitimate for statesmen to have in mind as they rule by specific decree. They should inform the ethos and conscience of the nation, and thus aid in forming the conscience of its statesmen.<sup>61</sup>

The integrity of the church is upheld not by issuing specific decrees but by articulating the proper theological significance of the structures and ends of political action.<sup>62</sup>

He explicitly links this clarifying task with the *esse/bene esse* construction detailed in chapter five. Ecumenical ‘attempts to influence decision’ lead the church away from the meaning of the ‘*esse* and *bene esse* of politics’ that ‘might have been drawn forth from Christian understanding’.<sup>63</sup> Previously I noted that this allows for purposive movement toward the good across the contingency of our moral lives. In this case that same theological interpretation of political agency is his correction of the “truncated Barthianism” of ecumenical pronouncements. Although he does not use the language of covenant, he calls for witness to theological truth which can be ‘made ready for action’.<sup>64</sup> This protects the proper role of political agency without compromising the integrity of ‘the ultimates of the Christian faith’.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>62</sup> Ramsey says in an unpublished paper that ‘theological ethics, of course, must go as far as it can (and therefore only as far as it can) in clarifying the meaning of political responsibility on the part of the international system. But I do not believe that Christian ethics can justify or incriminate particular wars without the addition of certain presumptions about the fact situation; and I do not see how fact-finding can be made a matter of conscience or a part of the clarifying work of Christian ethics or the witness of the church’. Ramsey, ‘Apologia Pro Vita Sua – One decade, that is’, Box 39, Ramsey Papers, 42a.

<sup>63</sup> Ramsey, *Who Speaks*, 53.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



### 6.2.2 The Magistrate's Conscience and the Question of Competency

When the church issues particular political pronouncements, Ramsey feels that they “fault” the conscience of the magistrate. I want to look carefully at what he means by this concept and suggest that his position is closely related to the prioritizing of the role of choice in moral theory in *Deeds and Rules*. This involves also a closer look at his assertion that there is a distinctive form of “competency” in political agency.

For Ramsey the ‘majesty of political rulership’ includes ‘the right of persons in their official capacities of magistrate or citizen not to have their consciences faulted’.<sup>66</sup> The church should therefore avoid the ‘fascination with decision making exercises’ that undercuts the proper role of judgment in political authority.<sup>67</sup> But it is important to note that he pairs his concern about “faulting” the magistrate’s conscience with a similar concern to avoid easing it. He writes that no ecumenical insights should attempt to ‘supplant the office of political judgment and decision on the part of magistrate and citizens, bind or fault their consciences, or in the slightest degree ease their special responsibility for deciding’.<sup>68</sup> As mentioned above, the role of properly framed and informed choice is central to his understanding of ‘the integrity of the office of political prudence’.<sup>69</sup> Ecumenical pronouncements should not usurp that office with specific policy directives.

Seizing upon this aspect of his work, Ernest Lefever rightly observes that Ramsey is ‘more concerned about the overburdened statesman than the under-

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 153, 108.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 108.

represented layman'.<sup>70</sup> But we must not read him too narrowly and presume that he is promoting a kind of moral political aristocracy.<sup>71</sup> As he notes in 'Some Rejoinders', 'the mantle of magisterial authority [falls] upon the shoulders of every citizen. We are all, in our degree, decision-makers, magistrates'.<sup>72</sup> He frequently reads democratic citizenship through John Calvin's language of 'lesser magistrates'.<sup>73</sup> This serves to emphasize the way the 'special responsibility for deciding' falls upon even those outside offices of political authority.<sup>74</sup>

When Ramsey protects the magistrate's conscience he is attempting to uphold 'the majesty of political rulership'.<sup>75</sup> Any ecumenical pronouncement must not usurp or collapse this proper function of authority. What stems from this strict sense of limitation on ecumenical pronouncements is an appreciation for the unique "competency" of political agency. He speaks of 'two sorts of competence, between the moral and political insights that may come from the heart of the Christian faith and the competence we all may have, in varying degrees, to make the decisions that belong to the exercise of political prudence'.<sup>76</sup> There are two principal forms of justification for this division.

On one hand, he tends to argue that the difference in competencies is based on knowledge or access to information. For instance, he rejects specific proposals

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<sup>70</sup> 'Protestant Political Pronouncements Under Fire', Ernest Lefever, October 6, 1967, Box 25, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>71</sup> For more on this misreading of Ramsey see McKenzie's comments on John Bennett and David Little in *Paul Ramsey's Ethics*, 20-21.

<sup>72</sup> Ramsey, 'Some Rejoinders', 187.

<sup>73</sup> See McKenzie, *Paul Ramsey's Ethics*, 19.

<sup>74</sup> Ramsey, *Who Speaks*, 119. Paul Camenisch observes, 'Ramsey's case for respecting the integrity and role of the specialists' prudential judgments is at the same time a case for respecting the integrity and role of every moral agent's prudential judgment'. 'Paul Ramsey's Task', 86.

<sup>75</sup> Ramsey, *Who Speaks*, 153. Just as choice is described as 'the production of a deed', so political agency 'makes life-giving, or at least actuality-giving, deeds out of words'. 'Case of the Curious', 106; *Deeds and Rules*, 153.

<sup>76</sup> Ramsey, *Who Speaks*, 128.

‘that attach labels “right” or “wrong”, “moral” or “immoral”, to innumerable particular choices of the statesman about which churchmen *as such* know less than he’.<sup>77</sup> They, as he observes elsewhere, lack ‘the services of an entire state department’ and so can only offer ‘supposedly expert specific advice’.<sup>78</sup> In *War and the Christian Conscience* he says, ‘there are questions of fact in diplomacy and in weaponry ... which the moralist as such knows nothing about’.<sup>79</sup> This suggests that access to facts differentiates the competency of the magistrate from that of the citizen.

On the other hand, he also suggests the distinction is based on the unique responsibilities of political office. As D.S. Long notes, the competency distinction is ‘making a descriptive claim about who actually makes governmental decisions’.<sup>80</sup> Ramsey says the church ‘inordinately seeks to assume ... decisions that belong in the realm of the state’.<sup>81</sup> This is not to say that ‘magistrates ... are always wise. It means only that they are magistrates, which the church is not’.<sup>82</sup> The distinction of competencies in this case depends on the authority to choose rather than knowledge or expertise.

These two forms of justification converge when considered in light of my earlier discussion of moral theory. It is not simply choice that marks the political competency – if decision-making is not to be arbitrary or baseless it must be properly

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>78</sup> Ramsey, ‘Apologia’, 35; *Who Speaks*, 43.

<sup>79</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 138. He also notes, ‘Rarely if ever is [the ethicist] competent to say with particularity that this individual instance is wrong, since that entails a judgment of fact no less than value’. ‘Apologia’, 33.

<sup>80</sup> D. Stephen Long, *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism: The Ethics of Paul Ramsey* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 110.

<sup>81</sup> Ramsey, *Who Speaks*, 31.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 153. As he says elsewhere, ‘at the minimum a proper Christian outlook and onlook should yield some sense of the autonomy of politics in its sphere, of the actions and responsibilities of statesmen and citizens in their offices’. Paul Ramsey, ‘A New Understanding of National Security’, Box 39, Ramsey Papers.

framed by structures identifying and upholding positions of authority. It must also be properly informed by particular facts and governing moral norms. Both contribute to a proper understanding of political agency.

### 6.3 Understanding Ramsey's Limitation of Church as Theoretician

In light of the “competency” assigned to political authority, what becomes of the “competency” designated to provide moral and political insights ‘from the heart of the Christian faith’?<sup>83</sup> I want to conclude by examining Ramsey’s claim that in the realm of politics the church is a theoretician. This will draw together the various observations and assertions that I have made in this chapter in a way that makes clear what I think *Deeds and Rules* and *Who Speaks* have to offer to this discussion of his political theology of covenant.

His description is worth quoting at length:

In politics the church is only a *theoretician*. The religious communities as such should be concerned with *perspectives* upon politics, with political doctrine, with the direction and structures of the common life, not with specific directives. They should seek to clarify and keep wide open the legitimate options for choice, and thus nurture the moral and political ethos of the nation. Their task is not the determination of policy. Their special orientation upon politics is, in a sense, an exceedingly limited one; yet an exceedingly important one.<sup>84</sup>

On the basis of the idea that increased specificity and particularity produce more useful moral judgments for the political realm – the view driven by situation ethics – Ramsey’s limitation of the church appears to render it irrelevant to the determination of political morality. Yet, in light of his theology of covenant we have a clearer picture of what he means by the “direction and structures” of the common life. He is

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<sup>83</sup> Ramsey, *Who Speaks*, 128.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 152. Ramsey also places this paragraph at the beginning of ‘The Ethics of Intervention’ in *The Just War*, 190.

here acknowledging the importance of a theological account of political morality which does not mitigate the inescapable contingency and temporality of the political realm. The “exceedingly limited” role of the church is a product of a proper sensitivity to the moral significance of choice.

To say this another way, Ramsey’s limitation of the church does not mean that in the face of war and political conflict she is reduced to merely reciting the Nicene Creed or the Gloria Patri. The articulation of “political doctrine” is the identification of good and legitimate political ends – the *bene esse* of politics. It is also holding those in political office accountable for their ‘special responsibility for deciding’.<sup>85</sup> That is what it means to say ‘every saving word but no more than can be said upon this basis’.<sup>86</sup>

Furthermore, despite his criticisms of the Geneva Conference, there are other church pronouncements that he finds more than satisfactory. One prime example is his positive endorsement of the perspective on war in the Pastoral Constitution on ‘The Church in the Modern World’ adopted by Vatican II. He is pleased with the statement’s perspective on ‘the morality of deterrence and the need for new security arrangements’.<sup>87</sup> He is also supportive of the ‘signal reassertion of the principle surrounding non-combatants with moral immunity from direct attack’.<sup>88</sup>

What is most important, however, is that these conclusions are ‘the fruit of Christian political reason connecting every political consideration with the *whole* idea of God’.<sup>89</sup> It is the opposite of the ‘truncated Barthianism’ of the Geneva Conference. As he says in *Who Speaks*, ‘the Vatican Council was able to place equal

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<sup>85</sup> Ramsey, *Who Speaks*, 119.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>87</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 388.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 388.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 389.

moral force behind the need for new directions in international politics and the need for world public authority, without being betrayed into making demonstrably false statements about Christian responsibility in the meanwhile before these are established.<sup>90</sup> By understanding the proper limitation of their task the council speaks for the church and witnesses rightly to the political realm.

The limitation of the church as theoretician contains within it all the elements of this discussion – an emphasis on properly framed and informed choice as evidence of a right perspective on political ethics; an understanding of the balance between the structure of created existence and the direction toward which that existence is being drawn in historical time; an appreciation of the church’s role in illuminating the *bene esse* of politics. Across this section on covenant I have tried to demonstrate Ramsey’s significance as a theological commentator on the essential features of political agency. While he does not use the language of covenant heavily in these two discussions in *Deeds and Rules* and *Who Speaks*, I believe that the arguments of each piece reveal the extent to which he articulates his political ethics from that theological perspective.

There is a line of thinking in Ramsey’s work that begins with Rousseau, produces the *esse/bene esse* construction and shapes his particular insights into moral theory and ecclesiology. I have tried to trace that line and identify it with his distinctive contribution to a theological perspective on politics. The line, however, does not end with *Deeds and Rules* and *Who Speaks*. He continues to develop his theological perspective and, indeed, shifts his use of covenant (and repentance) in the final years of his career. Understanding these shifts in theological perspective are not

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<sup>90</sup> Ramsey, *Who Speaks*, 133-134.

only helpful for appreciating his development as a theologian, but they also help clarify the shape and purpose of covenant and repentance in his political ethics.

Having dedicated two sections to repentance and covenant, I want to turn in the last section to the convergence of those two concepts in his later work and to the theological developments which drive his later writings. Until this point both concepts have remained distinct in my analysis of Ramsey's perspective on politics. The remaining task is to draw these two strands of the discussion together.

### **Section III**

#### **Covenant and Repentance in Paul Ramsey's Political Theology**

The third section of this study addresses the convergence of the theological themes of covenant and repentance in Ramsey's later political writings. I detail three significant theological shifts influencing his perspective on the political realm through engagements with Albert Schweitzer, H. Richard Niebuhr and Helmut Thielicke. On this foundation I examine two focal points which reformulate concepts of covenant and repentance. The first is his use of the covenant of Noah to develop a theological account of political realism. The second is his concept of "moral anguish" and the demand that moral evils be considered "no moment more". His continued insistence on the theological significance of contingency and temporality in these claims is highlighted through his interpretation of Luke 14, the distinction between taking counsel and counting costs and his claim that "politics is a kind of doing".



## **Chapter Seven**

### **Three Shifts in Theological Perspective**

Somewhere I read a statement, something to the effect that this cannot be the sort of world in which right actions lead to greater evil. Now I believe ultimately that is so, but not necessarily in space-time.<sup>1</sup>

– Paul Ramsey to Edwin O’Brien, 1976

The preceding two sections offered treatments of covenant and repentance as concepts in Ramsey’s political writings. The final section of this study now begins the task of drawing together those two strands of thought in order to articulate a more unified view of his theological perspective on the structure of political morality. While chapter eight will take up two reformulations of covenant and repentance, it is important to contextualize that discussion by observing three significant and intentional theological shifts. These mark attempts to take his theology in new and more constructive directions and to repair perceived defects in earlier concepts. He shifts: (1) from eschatology to Christology as the theological ground of political ethics; (2) from repentance to responsibility as the critical political concept to be appropriated from H. Richard Niebuhr’s theological ethics; (3) a shift from Karl Barth to Helmut Thielicke as the source of covenantal theology for the political realm.

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin F. O’Brien, ‘The Origin and Development of Moral Principles in the Writings of Paul Ramsey’, S.T.D. diss., Pontificate University of St. Thomas, 1976, Box 54, The Paul Ramsey Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Perkins-Bostock Library, Duke University, iv.

### 7.1 Albert Schweitzer and Ramsey's Shift from Eschatology to Christology as the Foundational Doctrine for Ethics

In 1987 Ramsey exchanged regular letters with Stanley Hauerwas in preparation for a joint volume to be published under the title *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*.<sup>2</sup> The letters address a range of theological and logistical issues related to the preparation of the manuscript (eventually it was decided that Hauerwas' contribution would be listed as an epilogue). In one of those letters, dated March 6, 1987, he writes, 'I'll take the time here to tell you what I would change in [*Basic Christian Ethics*] about eschatology'.<sup>3</sup> What follows is a lengthy discussion which argues that he now considers not eschatology but Christology to be the 'real issue'.<sup>4</sup>

Ramsey's letter to Hauerwas was not his first admission that his perspective on eschatology shifted after the publication of *Basic Christian Ethics*. In the final chapter of *Nine Modern Moralists* on Jacques Maritain and Edmond Cahn, he flags a discussion of eschatology and the work of Albert Schweitzer with the observation, 'the above paragraph significantly changes the emphasis, but not the substance, of my interpretation of the relation between eschatology and ethics in Jesus' teachings in *Basic Christian Ethics*'.<sup>5</sup> As Schweitzer is a central figure in each of these

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<sup>2</sup> These letters are the most difficult of Ramsey's papers to access. They are not listed under the finding aid for the Ramsey Papers and appear only in a description of the unprocessed materials in the Stanley Hauerwas Papers, despite their exclusion from that collection. They can be found in a box jointly labelled 'Ramsey/Hauerwas Papers Box 1 of 1'. See also *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ramsey to Stanley Hauerwas, March 6, 1987, Box 1, Ramsey/Hauerwas Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Perkins-Bostock Library, Duke University. See also *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950).

<sup>4</sup> Ramsey to Hauerwas.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 248.

discussions, briefly consulting *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* will illuminate the significance of Ramsey's later comments.<sup>6</sup>

Schweitzer argues against eighteenth and nineteenth century attempts to interpret Jesus' moral teachings independently of his vision of the coming apocalypse. Against this view he argues, first, that Jesus' moral teachings must be seen in the context of his apocalyptic vision. They must be interpreted as an 'interim ethic' because of his sense of the coming apocalypse.<sup>7</sup> Second, most modern individuals of Christian faith hold views of the apocalypse radically different from those of Jesus. He notes that they are 'incapable of translating his world-view from its late-Jewish form into their own forms of understanding'.<sup>8</sup> These conclusions present him with the challenge of reconciling the indispensability of Jesus' eschatological vision with the modern inability to adopt that vision.

Schweitzer's response is to call for modern analogues to the radical apocalyptic perspective. He notes, 'a period can have a real and living relationship with Jesus only to the extent to which it thinks ethically and eschatologically within its own categories, and can produce in its own world-view equivalents of those desires and expectations which hold such a prominent position in his'.<sup>9</sup> Later, he adds, 'all that is required is that we think of realizing the kingdom by moral effort with the same passion as that with which he expected it to be realized by divine intervention'.<sup>10</sup> This means that while we cannot genuinely replicate the interim

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<sup>6</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: First Complete Edition*, ed. John Bowden and trans. W. Montgomery, J.R. Coates, Susan Cupitt and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 485.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 483.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 485.

ethic, it is our ability to mimic the intensity of the apocalyptic vision bearing down on Jesus that will enable the realization of the kingdom.

Ramsey inherits the belief that Jesus has a distinctive apocalyptic vision that cannot be separated from his moral teachings. He also agrees that modern society contains many individuals who ‘no longer in any vivid or significant sense share the primitive perspective of apocalypse’<sup>11</sup> He is thus faced with a challenge similar to Schweitzer’s, only he plainly rejects the idea that Jesus offers only an ‘interim ethic’.<sup>12</sup> Instead, Ramsey charts an alternative course by proposing a distinction in Jesus’ ethics between those teachings ‘in which the effect of Jesus’ kingdom-expectation may be seen mainly in their greater *urgency* or stepped-up *intensity*, but whose essential meaning may be translated without great loss into more moderate statements’, and those teachings ‘whose very *content* and *meaning*, not simply the urgency associated with them, show the effect of Jesus’ kingdom-expectation’.<sup>13</sup>

The suggestion that there is a division of apocalyptic-content teachings and apocalyptic-intensity teachings is heavily criticized in secondary literature for its illegitimacy as an exegetical strategy.<sup>14</sup> I wish neither to rehash those debates here nor to defend Ramsey’s position on this point. For the purposes of this discussion it is sufficient to observe that both classes of moral teachings are principally defined by their relation to Jesus’ eschatological vision. Shaun Casey may be right to say that Jesus’ eschatological perspective is, for Ramsey, ‘a problem to be dealt with’, but I

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<sup>11</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 31.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. He says later, ‘[Jesus’] ethics is not understandable apart from the presence of God’s Kingdom’. *Nine Modern Moralists*, 248.

<sup>13</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 32, 34.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Jeffrey S. Siker, *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth-Century Portraits* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 95-96; Stanley Hauerwas, ‘How Christian Ethics Became Medical Ethics: The Case of Paul Ramsey’ in *Wilderness Wanderings* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 131-134; Shaun A. Casey, ‘Eschatology and Statecraft in Paul Ramsey’, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21, no. 2 (2008): 176-177; Scott Davis, “‘Et Quod Vis Fac’: Paul Ramsey and Augustinian Ethics’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 19, no. 2 (1991): 34.

do not think this also means that it is ‘morally insignificant’.<sup>15</sup> Rather, as David H. Smith observes, ‘the “apocalyptic” element which appeared to be a liability in the teaching of Jesus turns out to be its strongest asset’.<sup>16</sup> Schweitzer’s influence leads him to underscore the indispensability of eschatology in Christian ethics.

He retains this approach in *Nine Modern Moralists*, saying that ethics are ‘not understandable apart from the presence of God’s kingdom’.<sup>17</sup> On this occasion, however, the accent has shifted away from eschatology as ‘urgency and intensity’.<sup>18</sup> He says, ‘it was not, as Schweitzer supposed, the immanent *coming* of the kingdom which produced Jesus’ teachings as an “interim ethic”. It was rather the *presence* of the kingdom which produced this unlimited estimate of what one man owes another in prompt and radical service’.<sup>19</sup> Having been criticized for his interpretation of Schweitzer, Ramsey tries to change the ‘emphasis but not the substance’ of his early work in *Basic Christian Ethics*.<sup>20</sup>

In his letter to Hauerwas twenty years later he links the presence of the kingdom not to eschatology but to Christology. He writes that in *Basic Christian Ethics*, ‘I was too enamored with Schweitzer’s “consistent eschatology”. Not that I bought that view of interim ethics; exactly the opposite. But I used him – or came out of his analysis of the extremity of Jesus’ teaching – for pedagogical purposes’.<sup>21</sup> What he revises in his later thought is the idea that eschatology is the theological doctrine on which the ethics of Jesus stand or fall. He says, ‘I would go back now and speak also of the Kingdom already present, of the words “The Son of Man is

<sup>15</sup> Casey, ‘Eschatology and Statecraft’, 174, 176.

<sup>16</sup> David H. Smith, ‘Paul Ramsey, Love and Killing’, in *Love and Society: Essays in the Ethics of Paul Ramsey*, ed. James T. Johnson and David H. Smith (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists*, 248.

<sup>18</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 32.

<sup>19</sup> Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists*, 248.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ramsey to Hauerwas.

Lord also of the Sabbath,” giving full credit in Christian faith to the Messianic claims in the Gospels and in the mouth of Jesus (with no worry about trying to prove out Jesus’ self-consciousness)’.<sup>22</sup> The ground of ethics now lies primarily in Jesus as Messiah rather than Jesus as apocalyptic figure, just as the role of the kingdom in ethics lies largely in the possibilities opened by its inbreaking presence rather than intensity afforded by its expectation. He says of this shift, ‘the upshot is to say that not [eschatology] but Christology ... is the real issue’.<sup>23</sup>

The most heavily criticized section of this discussion in *Basic Christian Ethics* falls under the heading ‘In What Way, Then, Are the Teachings of Jesus Valid?’ Ramsey recognizes that he must reformulate its central claim about the need to translate Jesus’ apocalyptic vision. He assumes that an emphasis on Christology and the presence of the kingdom absolves the need to translate radical eschatological expectation. He does not, however, believe that his conclusions regarding the moral teachings of Jesus are invalidated by this shift. In typical fashion he does not think that the shift changes ‘the essential argument about preferential loves, protecting the innocent, etc’.<sup>24</sup> His political ethic remains in tact, only ‘the ground is just more clearly in Christ, not in the times coming’.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. This throws into sharp relief the conflict between what Ramsey sees in *Basic Christian Ethics* – a strong eschatological emphasis that needs to be grounded in Christology – and what Shaun Casey sees in *Basic Christian Ethics* – ‘resolution of how to preserve a Christocentric ethic that is not eschatological’. Casey, ‘Eschatology and Statecraft’, 177. Around the same time of these comments Ramsey also observes ‘the distinguishing feature is the role Christology plays in moral analysis and in life’. ‘A Letter to James Gustafson’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 13 (1985): 83.

<sup>24</sup> Ramsey to Hauerwas.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. For another example of new research being done on his attention to Christology see Eric Gregory’s use of Ramsey to argue that ‘*Christology and neighbor-love* rather than *theism and self-love* are the central conceptual terms for any Augustinian liberalism that wants to be theological’. *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 379.

### 7.1.1 Eschatology and Christology in Moral Perspective

For the purposes of this discussion of covenant and repentance it is important to observe that as Ramsey sought to revise and reformulate some of his earlier political concepts, he did so with an underlying desire to emphasize the foundational importance of Christology for ethics. For instance, while he insists that Christology rather than eschatology is the basis of disagreement between pacifists and just war theorists in *Speak Up*, only in this private correspondence does he link that assertion to a transition in his thinking since the publication of *Basic Christian Ethics*.<sup>26</sup>

Another telling example comes by way of an interview late in his career with Edwin O'Brien, who was writing his Ph.D. on Ramsey in Rome at the time.<sup>27</sup>

Because I believe the exchange is particularly important for our discussion, I will reprint it then offer several observations.

Ramsey: I use eschatology as a way to cut the link in moral reasoning, reasoning back from the good consequences. In this case whatever insures survival of judgments of right and wrong.

O'Brien: Then you are not an incarnationist, thinking that there will be a transition between this world and the next. You seem to emphasize a complete cut. There is no direct connection between eschaton and what we are doing now, that there will be a continuation of this life in a new heaven and earth.

Ramsey: No, no. Somewhere I read a statement, something to the effect that this cannot be the sort of world in which right actions lead to greater evil. Now I believe ultimately that is so, but not necessarily in space-time. In the noumenal sense of Emmanuel Kant this cannot be a universe, the grain of which runs ultimately against good will. But I do think that Catholic moral thought since Vatican II has tended more toward taking the consequences to decide the rightness and wrongness of moral acts. ... So in general I would say I am more pessimistic than the general Catholic mind about the human fate in the moral sense, but it's also the case that I am a messier thinker. I think the moral universe is pluralistic.

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<sup>26</sup> See Ramsey's comments on pacifism and just war theorists in *Speak Up*, 96-123.

<sup>27</sup> The interview is printed as an appendix to O'Brien's thesis. See O'Brien, 'The Origin and Development of Moral Principles', iv - vi.

Notice, first, the stark contrast between this criticism and earlier attacks on *Basic Christian Ethics*. He is accused of a “complete cut” between this world and the next, whereas earlier he was accused of constructing an ethic entirely on translated apocalypticism. The distance between these two criticisms marks the significance of the shift in his perspective on the role of eschatology for Christian ethics.

More importantly, however, is the attempt to define his position on eschatology in relation to Catholic moral thought since Vatican II. As he observes in 1980, Ramsey is concerned about the impulse in those thinkers ‘to explain all moral judgments in terms of proportionate reason’.<sup>28</sup> Such a move supplants judgments of right and wrong by using calculation of consequences as the sole criteria for determining morally appropriate action. In *The Just War* he says that ‘would be like giving up sin during Lent and returning to it afterward – for the sake of choiceworthy consequences’.<sup>29</sup> But, as we have seen, his sensitivity to the indeterminacy of political endeavors leaves Ramsey eager to retain a place for the ‘sort of ambiguity that cannot be eliminated from moral choice’.<sup>30</sup>

The unspoken reference in his interview with O’Brien is to his frustration with the work of Catholic moral theologian Richard McCormick. In a jointly edited volume published in 1978 titled *Doing Evil to Achieve Good: Moral Choice in Conflict Situations*, Ramsey rejects McCormick’s claim that all moral goods are

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Ramsey to William VanderMarck, June 23, 1980, Box 29, Ramsey Papers. He voices concerns about Catholic moral theology after Vatican II in a series of heated exchanges with VanderMarck in the summer of 1980.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Ramsey, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968; reprint, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1983), 479.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘Indeterminacy and Incommensurability in Moral Choice’ in *Doing Evil to Achieve Good: Moral Choice in Conflict Situations*, ed. Richard A. McCormick and Paul Ramsey (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1978), 69. In personal correspondence Ramsey says that his mind was ‘beclouded’ from ‘having come finally to see that what Dick McCormick means by “proportionate reason” does no work in ethics, it simply “explains” what everybody does in normative ethics’. Paul Ramsey to William VanderMarck, August 6, 1980, Box 29, Ramsey Papers.



commensurate (i.e., measurable).<sup>31</sup> Instead, he argues that ‘indeterminate decisions are often an obscure task of moral decision making’.<sup>32</sup> The only way to cut across this indeterminacy is through acts of judgment in accordance with moral principles of right and wrong. This is essentially the same argument that I have detailed in the preceding chapters on his use of covenant and repentance: political judgments are at the same time inescapably indeterminate and governed by rigid moral principles

What is remarkable about his comments in the interview with O’Brien is his claim that consequentialism is plagued by a failed eschatology. Because it uses human calculation to determine ‘the rightness and wrongness of actions’, consequentialism wrongly undersells the Christological foundation of the moral universe. The interviewer assumes that he seeks to sever all connections between this world and the next – i.e., that his eschatology is not “incarnationalist”. In fact, Ramsey is making the more fundamentally theological point that judgments of right and wrong can only be sustained by the work of Christ in proper (eschatological) perspective. As G. Scott Davis says of Ramsey’s view, ‘the gulf between “already” and “not yet” can only be bridged by Jesus, not by any human attempt at “elision between this world and the next”’.<sup>33</sup> Ironically, it is in a more “pluralistic” moral universe that eschatology and Christology can be seen in proper perspective. Ramsey’s comments demonstrate that developments in his theological perspective on eschatology – highlighted here as a shift from eschatology to Christology as the ground of ethics – is connected to his theological emphasis on contingency and

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<sup>31</sup> In the late seventies they jointly organized a volume of responses to McCormick’s ‘Ambiguity in Moral Choice’. See Richard A. McCormick and Paul Ramsey, eds., *Doing Evil to Achieve Good: Moral Choice in Conflict Situations* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1978). For extended commentary on the engagement see David Attwood, *Paul Ramsey’s Political Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 1992), 83-90.

<sup>32</sup> Ramsey, ‘Indeterminacy’, 73.

<sup>33</sup> Davis, ‘Et Quod Vis Fac’, 56.

temporality as features of moral political existence ('I am a messier thinker. I think the moral universe is more pluralistic').

This interview does not explicitly display the fruits of his heightened emphasis on Christology – that will be more apparent in the forthcoming discussion of Helmut Thielicke. Nonetheless, it demonstrates the way that his later understanding of eschatology is constructed on a foundational allegiance to the centrality of Christology in the determination of right and wrong. At the moment it is sufficient to note that his mature theological perspective maintains both that the grain of the universe runs with the good and at the same time that we cannot avoid the basic moral indeterminacy of all human endeavors.

## **7.2 Ramsey's Transition from Deferred Repentance to Responsibility**

In the early 1970s "strategy" was the word on Ramsey's mind when it came to political ethics. He, like many, was troubled by the US government's expanding stockpile of nuclear weapons and policy of "Mutual Assured Destruction". For such a calculated thinker it is remarkable that he described it as 'the most politically immoral nuclear policy imaginable'.<sup>34</sup> His response was to call for 'maximum concern [for] strategic, moral and political reasoning'.<sup>35</sup>

This interest in "strategic thinking" motivated a number of his political writings from this period. The most significant (and substantial) of these is 'A Political Ethics Context for Strategic Thinking', which originally appeared in a

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<sup>34</sup> Paul Ramsey, 'The MAD Nuclear Policy', *Worldview* 15, no. 11 (1972): 16.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

volume titled *Strategic Thinking and Its Moral Implications*.<sup>36</sup> The piece is an attempt, as James Turner Johnson notes, to turn ‘to the ground shared by himself and the secular strategists with whom he would communicate’.<sup>37</sup> In the first half of the essay he accepts the assignment of saying ‘something theological’ about strategic thinking.<sup>38</sup> In the second half he presents a number of conclusions from his life’s work on ‘the morality of war and deterrence’.<sup>39</sup> It was clearly an important essay for Ramsey and at the end of his career he reprinted a revised version as an appendix to *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*.<sup>40</sup>

There are two features of this essay that are particularly important for the discussion at hand. The first is his use of Helmut Thielicke’s reading of the covenant of Noah as a point of entry into a discussion of political realism. I will have to delay comment on that until the start of chapter eight – the forthcoming description of the shift from Barth to Thielicke contains essential groundwork for that discussion. The second is his reading of H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Responsible Self*.<sup>41</sup> Ramsey was particularly fond of Niebuhr’s ethic of responsibility and I want to examine here his

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘A Political Ethics Context for Strategic Thinking’, in *Strategic Thinking and Its Moral Implications*, ed. Morton A. Kaplan (Chicago: University of Chicago Center for Policy Study, 1973), 101-147.

<sup>37</sup> James Turner Johnson, ‘Morality and Force in Statecraft: Paul Ramsey and the Just War Tradition’, in *Love and Society: Essays in the Ethics of Paul Ramsey*, ed. David H. Smith and James Turner Johnson (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 110.

<sup>38</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 183.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 195. The original version contains an intermediary section addressing Philip Green’s *Deadly Logic: The Theory of Nuclear Deterrence* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1966). It is titled ‘The Devil and Philip Green’.

<sup>40</sup> Other thinkers also highlight the significance of the essay in Ramsey’s body of work. For instance, Stanley Hauerwas writes, ‘The thing I really liked, however, is “A Political Ethics Context for Strategic Thinking” and especially the first section. The use of Babel and Nebuhr are just extraordinarily well done. Moreover it makes clear the theological presuppositions that lie behind your political ethics’. Stanley Hauerwas to Paul Ramsey, September 27, 1973, Box 11, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>41</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York, Evanston and London: Harper & Row, 1963). See also ‘The Idea of Covenant and American Democracy’, *Church History* 23, no. 2 (1954): 126-135.

use of the work to shift from repentance to responsibility as a central interpretive concept for political ethics.<sup>42</sup>

Ramsey initiates the discussion by pointing to two different ways of interpreting ‘the international system’.<sup>43</sup> The first of these is the secular strategic approach represented by Thomas Schelling’s *The Strategy of Conflict*, which was a significant contribution to political science in the 1960s.<sup>44</sup> It interprets political action according to the ‘law of move and countermove’ or by ‘the action-reaction syndrome’.<sup>45</sup> Because there are a variety of interests and agents in the political realm, the job of strategic thinking is to ‘anticipate the subsequent behavior of other actors’.<sup>46</sup> Political action is always anticipatory, reactive and responsive to the changing landscape of international relations. He calls this the ‘common *interpretation* of action coming upon us’.<sup>47</sup>

The second approach is called the ‘large pattern of interpretation’ and is represented by Niebuhr. This position ‘defines the attitude and action of the “church” in contrast to the “state”’.<sup>48</sup> It interprets political action according to ‘something more ultimate than the opposed international system’.<sup>49</sup> While the secular strategy is a closed system of response (i.e., only between actors in the same political sphere),

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<sup>42</sup> Less than two years after his exchange with John Hick detailed in chapter three, Ramsey encourages the publication of *The Responsible Self* to James Gustafson, saying, ‘I am very glad that you are to set forward that manuscript of Richard Niebuhr’s so that it will secure the greatest possible understanding and impact’. Paul Ramsey to James Gustafson, January 14, 1963, Box 10, Ramsey Papers. Ten years later he registers his own interpretation of the impact of that work by using it as the basis for ‘A Political Ethics Context for Strategic Thinking’.

<sup>43</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 187.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

<sup>45</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 186-187.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 187-188.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 189.

the large pattern of interpretation is responsive and reactive to the transcendent action of God (or, in Niebuhr's language, radical monotheism).

Ramsey has three purposes in describing this division between the strategic 'opposed-system' and the theological 'trust-system'.<sup>50</sup> The first is to demonstrate to his secular audience that Niebuhr's understanding of response shares 'remarkable similarities' with the strategic viewpoint.<sup>51</sup> It is their sensitivity to the responsive and reactive character of human moral existence that makes 'the subtle analyses' of both systems 'mirror images of one another'.<sup>52</sup> He exhibits this point by calling attention to similar interpretations of responsive action in Schelling's *The Strategy of Conflict* and Niebuhr's *The Responsible Self*.

But Ramsey also suspects that secular theorists will not buy into the Niebuhrian suggestion that the trust-system is a comprehensive guide for political action. His second point is to acknowledge both the significance of the theological perspective and Niebuhr's inattention to the role of strategic political analysis. He notes that Niebuhr's account of human agency as responsive is 'activated and given content by an interpretation of God's action as the context in which all finite actors live and move'.<sup>53</sup> Because Niebuhr is 'first and foremost a theologian, not an analyst of the international system', he sees that 'there is good in whatever is happening'.<sup>54</sup> This relativizes and subjects judgments of justice and injustice in the international system under the divine judgment of God.

Ramsey acknowledges that this view alone will not suffice for the determination of right political action. There are important considerations that

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 191.

‘simply by omission, [Niebuhr] may seem to deny or underrate, namely, the need for independent analysis of action in the opposed international system’.<sup>55</sup> He adds later that Niebuhr ‘can perhaps be faulted for *not* having analyzed the peculiar nature of various other action-systems’.<sup>56</sup> This wrongly gives the impression that the theological perspective is sufficient to ‘erode or displace’ the strategic perspective.<sup>57</sup> Given his audience, Ramsey is eager to distance himself from this interpretation of political action. His criticism of Niebuhr’s viewpoint is a gesture toward his sympathy for the essential role of strategic analysis in international politics.

Shaun Casey interprets the protest against Niebuhr as ‘a major theological break with his teacher’.<sup>58</sup> But to make that judgment is to overlook Ramsey’s third point of rescuing the interpretation of Niebuhr and demonstrating that a transcendent theological perspective on political action can also have a proper role for strategic thinking. To do this he needs a theological way of upholding the eternal truth of the “trust-system” without neglecting the inescapable “opposed system” of international politics. His answer comes by way of Augustine’s two cities doctrine.

Ramsey says that it would ‘not be a mistake to attribute to Niebuhr the view of the great Augustine’.<sup>59</sup> Because the *civitas Dei* and the *civitas terrena* are ‘inextricably *intermingled* to the end of time’, the Christian ‘lives by trust and he also lives in a system of distrust’.<sup>60</sup> This allocates an appropriate role for both strategic and theological reasoning by recognizing the nature of responsive and

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 191-192.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 192. He continues on the same page: Niebuhr ‘can probably be faulted for failure to analyze the relation between a Christian’s trust and the wariness required by his office, or between “the church” as a trust-system and “the state” as an actor in an opposed-system’.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Casey, ‘Eschatology and Statecraft’, 174. Ramsey says, ‘As a theologian, I believe the truth Niebuhr affirms’. *Speak Up*, 191.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

responsible political action. On one hand, the moral agent responds ‘in all action coming upon him, *also* to the action of God; he moves with confidence among the living’.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, he responds ‘in all action coming upon him, *also* to the action and the anticipated action of a companion in an opposed-system; he ... moves with wariness among the living’.<sup>62</sup> His redundant use of the term “also” is meant to highlight the overlapping and intermingled cities in which we find ourselves as political agents.

The balance of moving jointly with confidence and wariness reflects a common theme in the preceding discussions of covenant and repentance: political judgments are inescapably ambiguous and yet grounded in the certainty of moral principles fashioned by Christian love. It is, as Johnson describes, ‘an Augustinian appeal to charity in a world where until the end of time there exists an ambiguous mixture of the City of God and the City of Earth’.<sup>63</sup> The two cities language has the effect of rejecting the false assumption that the political realm is ‘wholly inimical’ and radically opposite to the trust-system.<sup>64</sup> It also rejects the assumption that ‘kingdoms of the world can *in time* become the kingdom of God and his Christ’.<sup>65</sup> Both mistakenly elide the intermingled character of historical time and avoid the delicate balance of working for good simultaneously with confidence and wariness.

### 7.2.1 Politics as a Realm of Responsibility

It is noteworthy that even Ramsey’s earliest commentary on Niebuhr’s ethics recognizes a dual responsibility to God and to others. He observes in the essay on

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Johnson, ‘Morality and Force’, 109.

<sup>64</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 192.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 193.

Niebuhr in *Nine Modern Moralists*, ‘the response is not only to God. Instead, the extension and intensification of the scope of responsibility *for* is largely a matter of response *to* every one of the creatures of God’.<sup>66</sup> Although those early comments have not fully considered the political implications of such a claim, he uses *The Responsible Self* in ‘A Political Ethics Context’ to make essentially the same point about the theological necessity of responding both to the action of God and the actions of God’s creatures. His belief that Niebuhr’s ethic of responsibility captures the essential function of Augustine’s two cities doctrine is one reason Scott Davis claims that ‘Ramsey sees in H. R. Niebuhr the contemporary theologian who most fully embodies Augustine’s insights into the transforming nature of Christ’s advent into the human world’.<sup>67</sup>

His insistence that a theological perspective is essential for but not identical to the strategic approach to political action goes all the way back to his discussion of Augustine in *War and the Christian Conscience*. There he criticized Ernest Barker’s account of absolute justice for so radically transcending earthly determinations of justice that the heavenly city ‘did not fundamentally challenge the earthly one’.<sup>68</sup> Ramsey insisted that Barker ‘did not take seriously into account Augustine’s belief that there can be no justice, or rendering man his due, unless God is given his due’.<sup>69</sup> The upshot of the two cities doctrine for political ethics is that all earthly justice is rooted in the justice of God. Thus all political strategy is in some way dependent upon theological accounts of political action in relation to divine action. The two

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<sup>66</sup> Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists*, 154.

<sup>67</sup> Davis, ‘Et Quod Vis Fac’, 47.

<sup>68</sup> Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961), 19. In an interview late in his career Ramsey recalls that he spent a lot of time with Augustine’s *City of God*, Book XIX during the preparation of the book. See Kenneth L. Vaux, Sara Vaux, and Mark Stenberg, eds., *Covenants of Life: Contemporary Medical Ethics in Light of the Thought of Paul Ramsey*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 248.

<sup>69</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 19.



cities doctrine allows Ramsey to temper his criticisms of Niebuhr by highlighting the significance of the theological perspective for a proper appreciation of strategic thinking.

At the same time, this later use of Augustine also serves to rescue one of his early fundamental distinctions in Christian political reasoning, namely, the divide between public and private. In chapter one I observed that in *War and the Christian Conscience* he positions himself against ‘the modern period’ where ‘a complete distinction between personal and political morality ... [has] only exhibited or accomplished a return of mankind to significant citizenship in one city only’.<sup>70</sup> But his allegiance to Reinhold Niebuhr left him unable to avoid this distinction altogether. The impetus for his use of repentance as a point of entry into political ethics was a desire to understand the difference between private and public morality (though he insisted there was ‘not an essential difference’).<sup>71</sup> With the shift to the language of responsibility he no longer juxtaposes demands on an individual in private capacity and demands on the office of the magistrate in the political community. Rather, he has replaced that account altogether with one where the tension of moral political existence is now characterized by two intermingled cities.<sup>72</sup>

Two hallmarks of his description of politics as a realm of responsibility follow from this shift from private/public to city of God/city of man. First, all political endeavors are limited by the unpredictability of the city of Man. He says, ‘statesmen are called to action in the midst of the *unpredictabilities* of other collectives and their leaders. The nation-state is surrounded by arbitrariness on all

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., xxii.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>72</sup> That is not to say that his work in *War and the Christian Conscience* did not draw upon Augustine’s two cities doctrine – it did. My point is simply that politics as deferred repentance drew heavily on the public/private distinction and in the shift from repentance to responsibility that emphasis disappeared.

sides'.<sup>73</sup> He is quick to add that being surrounded by arbitrariness is not the same as being surrounded by hostility. Rather, the unpredictability of the political realm 'requires, *among other things*, preparedness, threat, and perhaps an actual use of force'.<sup>74</sup> This simply means that the politician is responsible for preparing for the possibility of the worst political event, but not the inevitability of it.

Of course, unpredictability rather than enmity as a hallmark of the political realm was Ramsey's point all along. He insisted to John Hick that deferred repentance was not sinister but rather merely doing what is right in a climate where the determination of right action is dependent upon continuously changing circumstances.<sup>75</sup> The problem with the earlier account was that deferred repentance confusingly implied a suspension of moral norms in the political realm. With the language of responsibility Ramsey is free to speak of the political system as 'characterized by the unpredictability of autonomous actors and reactors'.<sup>76</sup> This still allows him to maintain and define 'the minimum morality of responsible action within the inter-state system'.<sup>77</sup> The tension of the heavenly city and the earthly city, as he says in 'Turn Toward Just War', 'puts politics in its place' and allows that 'decision and action can be what they are worth'.<sup>78</sup> When paired with the two cities doctrine the language of responsibility allows him to sidestep any indication of moral anarchy and emphasize systemic unpredictability and the importance of political judgment.

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<sup>73</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 195.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>75</sup> Paul Ramsey to John Hick, July 13, 1961, Box 11, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>76</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 197.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Paul Ramsey, 'Turn Toward Just War', *Worldview* 5, no. 7-8 (July-August 1962): 9.

The second hallmark of politics as a realm of responsibility is that political actors cannot simply do as they please; there are rules of practice governing political conduct. Because politics is a realm of response – in Ramsey’s words, ‘since the actors are peoples (or their governments) who have purposes’ – he rejects any attempt to analyze political interaction which refuses to come to terms with the systemic limitations and rules of practice.<sup>79</sup> This is why the just war theory offers not merely ‘statements of the justifications needed for resorts to conflict’, but, more widely, ‘an understanding of the strivings going on among interacting collectives by other political means’.<sup>80</sup>

These rules of practice are essentially similar to the ‘judgmental criteria’ in his account of deferred repentance.<sup>81</sup> The shift here is to define those moral criteria in the theological language of responsibility. Thus, as he says elsewhere, ‘theological ethics, of course, must go as far as it can ... in clarifying the meaning of political responsibility’.<sup>82</sup> What is most significant about Ramsey’s shift to politics as responsibility is that he sustains the basic political themes of contingency and temporality, as well as the insistence on “judgmental criteria”, while leaving behind both the tenuous distinction between our private and public moral capacities and the ambiguity over who or what is having its repentance deferred.

Thus, I believe Ramsey reinterprets his account of politics as deferred repentance in light of Niebuhr’s *The Responsible Self* to produce an account of politics as a realm of response and responsibility. This theological shift sets the stage

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<sup>79</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 197. He calls such attempts ‘an incorrect account of the action going on in that system’.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. The just war theory is, for Ramsey, ‘a proposal concerning the very nature of the international system’.

<sup>81</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 309.

<sup>82</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘Apologia Pro Vita Sua – One decade, that is’, Box 39, Ramsey Papers, 42a.

for Ramsey's later reformulation of these perspectives in the concepts of "no moment more" and "moral anguish". Now, however, I turn to Ramsey's shift from Barth to Thielicke.

### **7.3 From Karl Barth to Helmut Thielicke**

Covenant does not disappear from Ramsey's later writings quite as repentance does. In discussions of politics he instead continues reinventing his use of the term to accord with the expanding range of doctrines upon which he situates his understanding of political realism. One of these late reformulations of covenant relies on a shift from the theology of Karl Barth to that of Helmut Thielicke. I want to suggest that the shift reflects an attempt to infuse his realism with, at the same time, a stronger doctrine of Christology and a more accessible description of the political realm to secular reasoning. That he thought Thielicke could address these problems, however, requires demonstration. The evidence is disparate and he never explicitly gives reasons for the disappearance of Barth and the appearance of Thielicke. I give my conclusion, then, up front, and ask the reader's good faith in withholding judgment on the evidence until the full argument has been made.

#### **7.3.1 Ramsey's Turn away from Barth's Covenant Theology in Political Ethics**

Given that he felt the need to shift the ground of his ethics from eschatology to Christology, why not simply return to Barth for this manouvre? I want to offer three reasons why I believe Ramsey is hesitant to continue using Barth as a resource for his political ethics. The first is what appears to be a fear of misinterpretation of *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, which he composed in part as a deliberate attempt to

engage those (particularly in the South) who were inclined to privilege social order to the pursuit of justice through civil disobedience.<sup>83</sup> When he sent a copy to Mary Frances Thelen, Professor of Religion at Randolph-Macon Women's College, he noted, 'some parts of my book are calculated to make me persona grata with the Southern white man, and therefore persona non grata in other quarters. I hope that these parts will be received as an effort to induce some fundamental reflection into the situation, and not at all a rejection of the action itself, much less the motives (*sic*) of the participants'.<sup>84</sup> He seems to have hoped that his use of Barth's covenant theology would be a form of theological and social reasoning accessible to those unconvinced by the witness of the sit-ins and the moral rationale of civil disobedience.

At the same time, he also seems to be frustrated by misinterpretations of this approach. One folder of writings and speeches in the Ramsey Papers contains a response to a paper by 'Professor Edwards' of Wesley Theological Seminary on 'White Racism'.<sup>85</sup> Although the original paper by Edwards is lost and the argument is difficult to reconstruct based solely on Ramsey's comments, I take the author to have interpreted *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* as a defense of the conservative structures of oppression in the South at the time. Ramsey, upset that his use of Barth

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<sup>83</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* (New York: Association Press, 1961). In an interview late in his career Ramsey notes that the book began as a response to a paper written by 'the commission on the Church and Economic Justice of the National Council of Churches'. Vaux, et. al., eds., *Covenants of Life*, 249.

<sup>84</sup> Paul Ramsey to Mary Frances Thelen, April 11, 1961, Box 27, Ramsey Papers. See also Mary Frances Thelen, Review of *Christian Ethics and the Sit-in*, by Paul Ramsey, *Journal of Bible and Religion* 30, no. 1 (1962): 67-68+70. In light of this exchange it is also worth noting that women were not admitted to the graduate school at Princeton until 1961. See Paul Ramsey to Edwin R. Walker, November 26, 1962, Box 29, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>85</sup> Paul Ramsey, 'Response to Paper on "White Racism"', Box 42, Ramsey Papers. Ramsey does not mention the professor's first name or area of research.

had been interpreted as a rooting of racial distinctions in the doctrine of creation, responds,

Throughout his paper, I regret to say, Professor Edwards associates me with the theological view that makes racial distinctions a part of the 'order of creation'. This despite the fact that I cite with approval the eloquent passage of Karl Barth which says that the only 'inter-face' situation that is of the order of God's ineffaceable creation is our man-womanhood, and in that precise connection denies that racial grouping (*sic*) have any such fundamental meaning'.<sup>86</sup>

I take Edwards' misinterpretation to have put some measure of fear in Ramsey's mind over the usefulness of Barth for such arguments. The poor commercial and academic reception of *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* – his appeals for a revised and enlarged edition, as noted in chapter five, were swiftly rejected and the reviews of the book were largely negative – must have offered little encouragement of a more charitable reception.

Notice that in the above quotation rather than defending his position on political ethics, Ramsey retreats into the created significance of gender distinctions. I take his confidence in the book and his vision for its potential impact on a Christian understanding of political ethics to have been on the rocks not long after its release. Add to that uneasiness about misinterpretation and he seems to have been content to leave behind the usefulness of Barth's covenantal theology in political ethics.

His move into the realm of gender distinctions gestures toward my second proposed reason for the shift to Thielicke. Although brief, I believe it to be significant: Ramsey found that Barth's formula fit more comfortably with his arguments in medical and sexual ethics. After 1961 the internal basis/external basis formula next explicitly appears in its new role as the theological groundwork for *The*

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

*Patient as Person*.<sup>87</sup> Secondary literature mirrors this movement by tending to consider the implications of his use of Barth for medical and reproductive ethics instead of the importance of *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* for his development as a political thinker.<sup>88</sup>

The third reason I propose for the abandonment of Barth's covenantal theology in political ethics has to do with Barth's own ethics and selected "Barthian" interpretations of Ramsey's just war theory. In chapter five I highlighted the fact that he uses *Dogmatics* III/1 to reinforce his political theology rather than III/4.<sup>89</sup> In his essays 'Uses of Power' and 'The Case of the Curious Exception', he uncovers the reason for that preference by voicing several criticisms of the 'special ethics' in III/4. In both essays he characterizes Barth's position by associating the Christological rooting of the state with collapsed eschatological perfectionism.<sup>90</sup> Barth is not the only person Ramsey falsely accuses of eschatological perfectionism (it is one of his favorite lines of attack), but it seems in this case that his flawed reading of III/4 contributes to the turn to Thielicke.

Along these lines he also seems to think that Barth's Christology leads to a distinct misinterpretation of his own use of Christ as the ground of just war norms.

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<sup>87</sup> Paul Ramsey, *The Patient as Person* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970). He notes, 'I hold with Karl Barth that covenant-fidelity is the inner meaning and purpose of our creation as human beings, while the whole of creation is the external basis and condition of the possibility of covenant' (xii).

<sup>88</sup> See, for instance, William Werpehowski, *American Protestant Ethics and the Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 40-46.

<sup>89</sup> As mentioned in chapter five, III/4 was unavailable in English when Ramsey used III/1 in *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*. See Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, vol. III, 1 of *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance and trans. J.W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958); *The Doctrine of Creation*, vol. III, 4 of *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance and trans. A.T. Mackay, T.H.L. Parker, H. Knight, H.A. Kennedy, J. Marks (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961).

<sup>90</sup> Oliver O'Donovan defends Barth against Ramsey's criticisms in these two essays and I will not recycle his argument except for the purposes of demonstrating that Ramsey wanted to move in an alternative direction to the way that Barth's special ethics leaned. See 'Karl Barth and Paul Ramsey's "Uses of Power"', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 19, no. 2 (1991): 1-30.

Said another way, he never feels that his just war theory gets a fair reading from “Barthians”. An exchange of letters with Arthur Cochrane at Yale University proves instructive on this point.

In 1964 Cochrane writes in response to Ramsey’s published review of his book on war in *Cross Currents*. He begins by reciting Ramsey’s observation that the Barmen Declaration ‘puts the just war theory on trial and condemns it along with the natural justice it expresses. [The perspective of the Barmen Declaration is that] if there is a just war theory beside the revelation of Christ, then it will come to pass that “Christians” will use it to justify their allegiance to some Hitler or nation as a second Lord’.<sup>91</sup> Cochrane objects to this claim, saying, ‘may I suggest, Paul, that there is a certain confusion here (a) in regard to the relation of the Barmen Declaration to natural law; (b) in regard to the relation of Barmen to a theory of just war’.<sup>92</sup> He goes on to protest Ramsey’s judgment that the Barmen Declaration denies the existence of natural law and to remind him that ‘all the signatories of the Barmen Declaration then believed in a doctrine of just war!’<sup>93</sup>

The aspect of Ramsey’s response relevant for this discussion is his concern over Barmen’s failure to locate the theological ground of the just war theory in revelation rather than natural law. He rejects Cochrane’s suggestion that his doctrine of just war ‘must derive from natural law’, arguing instead that just war norms have to do with ‘the drawing out of the implications of Christian faith and love for

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<sup>91</sup> Arthur C. Cochrane to Paul Ramsey, March 4, 1964, Box 3, Ramsey Papers. The exchange may have had lingering significance for Ramsey. He returns to Cochrane on the subject of the Barmen Declaration several years later in ‘Liturgy and Ethics’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7, no. 2 (1979): 139-171.

<sup>92</sup> Cochrane to Ramsey.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.



concrete social and political issues'.<sup>94</sup> Just war norms must be rooted in Christ if they are to take seriously the depth of human sin and the radical work of charity made possible by his redemptive love. As early as *Basic Christian Ethics* Ramsey insisted that it was not natural law but agape that determined the just war criteria.<sup>95</sup>

Almost 25 years later he makes precisely the same point with regard to the work of a Mennonite thinker operating within a Barthian theological framework, John Howard Yoder. He says in *Speak Up*,

Unless his understanding is corrected or supplemented elsewhere, Yoder believes that just-war appeals are only and simply to *natural justice*, ... If that were sufficient, then the state's function in the use of armed force and citizen participation are based entirely on *another morality* than that of the Gospel; there is then a 'double morality' needed to warrant Christian participation in the resistance of evil, ... This minimalist justice could exhaust itself in defense of one's own life, one's own family, one's own nation against aggression; and it would require a doubling of loyalties to couple *that* or natural justice or universal human rights with Christian charity.<sup>96</sup>

What he intends by rejecting any understanding of a "doubling of loyalties" is the idea that an appeal to ethics based entirely on something other than the Gospel would subsequently present to Christians two separate accounts of their justified moral action in politics.

Although Ramsey's protests are difficult to understand, he seems to think that the kind of Barthian theological perspective on politics found both in the Barmen Declaration and Yoder's work produces a distinct blindness to the way in which just

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<sup>94</sup> Paul Ramsey to Arthur C. Cochrane, April 6, 1964, Box 3, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>95</sup> What Marcia Sichol says of the principle of proportionality applies to all of his just war norms: 'Ramsey does not derive the principle of proportionality from any of the three: order, justice, or law. Rather, he bypasses these as well as natural law and derives the principle of proportionality directly from agape'. Marcia Sichol, *Making of a Nuclear Peace* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 34. See also page 77.

<sup>96</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 100. It is important to keep in mind that he says in 1962, 'Let me say in advance that this book in no way defends a proper place for the exercise of man's sense of natural justice, if this means something that is regarded as universally right and wrong on any conceivable premise.' *Nine Modern Moralists*, 3.

war norms are derived from the love of Christ and not from a double loyalty between revelation and natural law. He is worried that Barth will tempt readers into overlooking the deeply Christological roots of his political theology. This becomes clearest in his attempt to articulate to Cochrane his suspicions of the usefulness of Barth's theological perspective for political ethics. He writes,

I do not even object to Barth's denial that resort to war is of the essence of the State's responsibilities (though this statement of a christological doctrine of the state's appointment is apt to be exceedingly misleading), provided his position allows not just for what he calls an exception (here and elsewhere in his specific ethics) but that there are love-embodied principles for the governance of the 'exception'. Where his statement misleads is that it is apt to tempt us into supposing that the polis, Christologically viewed, is now already the heavenly polis, and that the use of force is something less than a generally valid responsibility, whose limitations are to be Christologically reflected upon in the service of life in a fallen world (not derived from the Fall).<sup>97</sup>

Just as detailed in chapter five, the difference between Barth and Ramsey emerges over their understanding of the use of force. But Ramsey's comments on this occasion reflect an underlying anxiety about Barth tempting readers into a misinterpretation of the just war theory as "derived from the fall". That is precisely what he thinks has taken place in the Barmen Declaration and Yoder's critical approach.

I mentioned above that after *Basic Christian Ethics* he seeks to increase the visibility of the Christological foundations of his political ethics. Although he misinterprets Barth (and Barmen) here – Cochrane makes this point and Ramsey ignores it – the crucial observation is that he feels the need to turn away from Barth to make that move. However possible it may have been for him to employ Barth in the direction he wanted his ethics to go, he could not see Barth's usefulness for the

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<sup>97</sup> Ramsey to Cochrane.

project. Thus, as early as 1964, just three years after the publication of *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, Ramsey was looking for a new source of covenant theology to emphasize the Christological root of political ethics.

### 7.3.2 Ramsey's Turn to Covenant in the Political Ethics of Helmut Thielicke

This search leads Ramsey to the second volume of Helmut Thielicke's *Theological Ethics*.<sup>98</sup> Thielicke developed a Lutheran approach to political ethics in Hamburg, Germany during the 1960s and 70s while Ramsey worked on similar themes at Princeton University. Early in his career Ramsey observes that in Luther's political ethics soldiers and magistrates determine right action 'entirely by natural justice and by the necessities of the situation, and not at all by love'.<sup>99</sup> While on the basis of this claim a turn to a Lutheran thinker like Thielicke may seem to run against the aforementioned emphasis on the Christological root of just war norms, Ramsey shares several significant affinities with Thielicke's political writings.<sup>100</sup>

Here James Childress helps to capture the difference between Barth and Thielicke as resources for political theology. He says,

Ramsey indicates the affinities of his position along these lines with the Lutheran interpretation of the state, which appears in Künneth's and Thielicke's thought, among others, as an 'order of necessity'. For Ramsey, then, in contrast to Barth, the Fall and God's governance of man *post lapsum* and pre-resurrection are 'decisively important for Christian political theory'. He offers a 'realistic interpretation of the state and its law as God's governance of a fallen world'.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, vol. II: Politics, ed. William H. Lazareth (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1964; reprint, 1969).

<sup>99</sup> Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists*, 197. In this passage Ramsey is using Brunner to call attention to the Lutheran attention to the 'necessities of the situation'. He maintains, however, that the judgmental criteria of politics are determined by *agape*.

<sup>100</sup> For more on Ramsey and Luther see Michael C. McKenzie, *Paul Ramsey's Ethics: The Power of 'Agape' in a Postmodern World* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 15-17, 49-53.

<sup>101</sup> James F. Childress, *Civil Disobedience and Political Obligation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 95.

Childress helps to call attention to the fact that in Ramsey's turn from Barth to Thielicke he seeks an account of political realism with a proper respect for the fallen world in which we find ourselves. The important distinction to keep in mind here is the one previously noted in the exchange with Arthur Cochrane: the difference between ethics determined by Christ in a fallen world and ethics determined by the Fall. Ramsey seeks a place for the Fall in the determination of realism while at the same time insisting on the ground of political ethics in the person and work of Christ.

Charles Curran fails to account for this difference when he comments on the role of Thielicke in Ramsey's ethics, saying, 'Jesus Christ has come into the world and sent his Spirit upon us, but political activity goes on much as before under its own sign'.<sup>102</sup> Thielicke provides a theological link between covenant in the Old Testament and the modern context of just war norms – but it is always for Ramsey the love of Christ that determines those norms. His turn to Thielicke is accordingly a way of renewing the Christological center of political ethics through covenant theology.<sup>103</sup>

Through Thielicke he also seeks potential inroads into dialogue with secular accounts of the political realm. He sees Thielicke's use of the covenant of Noah and Tower of Babel narratives as accessible to secular reasoning. In 'Force and Political Responsibility', the first major essay written on political ethics after *The Just War*, he notes,

In speaking of these stories, I may sound like a literalist. I claim rather to be a mythologist, who happens to believe that there is more light and truth

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<sup>102</sup> Curran, *Politics, Medicine, and Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 14.

<sup>103</sup> Ramsey, of course, always interpreted covenant Christologically. Jeffrey Siker's observation about Ramsey's use of the Old Testament in *Basic Christian Ethics* applies also to his appropriation of Thielicke's reading of Genesis: 'Ramsey's selection of Old Testament texts, however, is clearly and self-consciously guided by his christocentric approach to Christian ethics, and so to the Bible'. *Scripture and Ethics*, 81.

concerning the political task of mankind to be found in these myths than in any number of theorems about politics consecutively arranged, or in any amount of 'systems analysis' or decision-making with or without the assistance of computers. The claim is doubtless true of other great cultural myths as well; but these are ours. ... Instead of taking these stories to be either literally or mythically true, you are welcomed to regard them as legends and fantasies. I suggest only that you join me in the thought-experiment of asking what would be the contour's of man's political task on the underside of these myths *if* they were true of the human condition. I ask you to think *as if* you with all men are present at political creation, at the Fall, at Babel, and with Noah after the evil propensities of men's hearts in that generation deservedly ended in the first destruction – and the end of that end was government. What then would government mean?<sup>104</sup>

He takes these 'myths of Genesis' to be 'one of the world's best commentaries on government' and hopes they will provide a point of entry into political realism even for those who are not Jewish or Christian.<sup>105</sup>

There are several other examples of attempts by Ramsey to make secular use of Thielicke. He writes to Michael Walzer in praise of *Just and Unjust Wars* and recommends that Walzer's position 'bears strong resemblance' to Thielicke's.<sup>106</sup> In 1973 he assigns 'Force and Political Responsibility' as 'homework' to a group of military chaplains and uses the narratives as a neutral starting point for describing the context of political action.<sup>107</sup> Lastly, in 'A Political Ethics Context for Strategic Thinking' he reads Thielicke alongside H. Richard Niebuhr and secular strategic political theorist Thomas Schelling.<sup>108</sup> As I mentioned above, the essay is an attempt

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<sup>104</sup> Paul Ramsey, 'Force and Political Responsibility' in Ernest W. Lefever, ed., *Ethics and World Politics: Four Perspectives* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 45-46.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 47. In 'A Political Ethics Context for Strategic Thinking' Ramsey reads the stories as offering parallel conclusions to those suggested by political theorist Thomas Schelling. *Speak Up*, 188-189. He speaks of the Tower of Babel as 'a myth of the origins of a world of countervailing constellations of political power' on page 184.

<sup>106</sup> Paul Ramsey to Michael Walzer, June 12, 1979, Box 29, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>107</sup> Paul Ramsey, 'Military Service as a Moral System', *Military Chaplain's Review* 2, no. 1 (January 1973): 8.

<sup>108</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 188-189.

to examine ‘the ground shared by himself and the secular strategists with whom he would communicate’.<sup>109</sup>

However counterintuitive it may seem, I suggest that Ramsey turns to Thielicke’s covenant theology for an emphasis on the Christological center of political ethics and, simultaneously, an accessible way of characterizing political realism to secular forms of reasoning. There is much more to be said in the next chapter on his appropriation of Thielicke’s commentary on the covenant of Noah. The aim of this chapter has been to initiate the process of bringing together the concepts of covenant and repentance by taking note of three significant theological shifts from eschatology to Christology, from repentance to responsibility and from Barth to Thielicke.

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<sup>109</sup> Johnson, ‘Morality and Force’, 110.

## Chapter Eight

### Late Reformulations of Covenant and Repentance

Such reflection is required by the tension among just-war teachings, by the fact that we are obliged to observe all the norms.<sup>1</sup>

– Paul Ramsey, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*

As I argued in the introduction to this study, Ramsey does not talk enough about repentance for it to serve as a general category in his political ethics. Covenant, too, though he calls it the *Leitmotif* of his work, is employed unsystematically and to various purposes in his political ethics.<sup>2</sup> There is no summative piece of writing from the end of his career which draws together his thinking on covenant and repentance and plainly justifies the path our exploration has taken. Yet, I believe that the concepts of contingency, temporality and political judgment, which have weaved in and around these two terms, do significantly converge. I hinted at this in the previous chapter; now I want to take the matter further by relating covenant and repentance to two focal points in Ramsey's later writings. The first of these is the use of the covenant of Noah and Tower of Babel narratives in 'A Political Ethics Context for Strategic Thinking'.<sup>3</sup> The second involves two striking phrases that occur in his last book, *Speak Up for Just War or*

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 73.

<sup>2</sup> See Kenneth L. Vaux, Sara Vaux, and Mark Stenberg, eds., *Covenants of Life: Contemporary Medical Ethics in Light of the Thought of Paul Ramsey*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 256. Perhaps Ramsey acknowledges this lack of systematisation when, rather than replacing James Gustafson's descriptions of his ethics as 'love-monism' with 'covenant-monism', he suggests 'covenant-ridden' instead. Paul Ramsey, 'A Letter to James Gustafson', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 13 (1985): 74. See also James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 85-91.

<sup>3</sup> I will quote from the revised version of the essay reprinted as an appendix to *Speak Up*, 181-212.

*Pacifism*: “no moment more” and “moral anguish”. These two focal points mark an attempt to repair and rethink the theological perspective behind his earlier use of covenant and repentance. Once my analysis is in place, I will return finally to discuss the convergence of these themes in his claim that ‘politics is a kind of doing’.<sup>4</sup>

### 8.1 The Covenant of Noah, the Tower of Babel and Politics as Power vs. Power

I mentioned in chapter seven that ‘A Political Ethics Context’ contains two essential arguments for the discussion of covenant and repentance. I have already addressed his use of H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Responsible Self* with regard to the shift from repentance to responsibility. Now we must take up his use of Helmut Thielicke.<sup>5</sup> In 1962 Ramsey observes that the Genesis narrative of the Tower of Babel can ‘teach us a great deal about man’s political life’.<sup>6</sup> In ‘A Political Ethics Context’ he pairs that insight with Thielicke’s reading of the covenant of Noah to offer two lessons from these Genesis “myths”.<sup>7</sup>

From the story of the Tower of Babel we learn that human striving is subject to divine overruling (and therefore limited). He repeats the H.R. Niebuhrian idea that ‘each man and nation has “a view of the universal”, but none has “the universal view”’.<sup>8</sup> Politically speaking, ‘there is confusion of tongues, confusion of justices’.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Ramsey, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968; reprint, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1983), 525.

<sup>5</sup> See Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, vol. II: Politics, ed. William H. Lazareth (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1964; reprint, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘Turn Toward Just War’, *Worldview* 5, no. 7-8 (1962): 8. He repeats material from this early essay eleven years later in ‘A Political Ethics Context’.

<sup>7</sup> In the original publication he proposes ‘a rapid sketch of insights into and perspectives upon mankind’s existence in political communities to be gained from looking at ourselves through the synoptic “pre-historic” culture myths in the first book of the Hebrew Bible named “In the Beginning” (*Genesis*, the Greeks called it)’. ‘A Political Ethics Context for Strategic Thinking’, in *Strategic Thinking and Its Moral Implications*, ed. Morton A. Kaplan (Chicago: University of Chicago Center for Policy Study, 1973), 101.

<sup>8</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 184.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



Because our political lives continue to operate under the divine judgment witnessed at Babel, contingency of knowledge and limitation of certainty are fixed elements of the context of political action. Michael McKenzie captures nicely the function of this narrative, saying, ‘the story of humanity is consistently one of submerged pretensions ... divine judgment is always the result of such *hubris*’.<sup>10</sup> To say it another way, the story of Babel displays Ramsey’s understanding of what it means to be political agents living in the earthly city.

From the story of the covenant of Noah, we learn that government – i.e., systems of political authority and representation – is the good gift of God for the preservation of the fallen world. He learns from Thielicke that ‘the world between the fall and the judgment is not only empowered to set up states, it is *condemned* to do so’.<sup>11</sup> We are “empowered” in the sense that the covenant ‘holds the waters of God’s wrath in place’.<sup>12</sup> The promise that God’s judgment will never again take the destructive form it takes in the flood frees us for the pursuit of justice in a fallen world. At the same time, we are “condemned” in the sense that the covenant commissions government by these words from Genesis 9: ‘Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God made he man’.<sup>13</sup> The covenant installs ‘a power’ that ‘holds in place the imaginations of men’s hearts’.<sup>14</sup> This reflects the continual limitation and contingency of human agency and political determinations of justice. In so doing it determines the ‘nature, mission, and means’

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<sup>10</sup> Michael C. McKenzie, *Paul Ramsey's Ethics: The Power of 'Agape' in a Postmodern World* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 441.

<sup>12</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 185.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. As Thielicke says, ‘egoism ... is not set aside but limited, controlled, and used so that its force may be directed into positive channels’. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 165-166.

of government in a fallen world.<sup>15</sup> Thielicke thus provides an account of the covenant of Noah that articulates the divine link between limitation and preservation, restraint and gift and empowerment and condemnation.

It is also worth noting that Ramsey uses two phrases—“power vs. power” and “the law of move and countermove”—to describe the character of political engagements in this period of time between the fall and the last judgment. He argues that ‘the Noachian covenant means that ... power must be limited by further power, else it is bound to become arbitrary and unlimited’.<sup>16</sup> The upshot of this is a rejection of any analysis of political action adhering to a philosophy of “might is right”. He writes in unpublished notes on Thielicke that such an approach ‘is a decision against the Noahic order of the world ... against the principle of order from which the state derives and on which all authority and law depend’.<sup>17</sup> In this way he uses Thielicke’s reading to set up his subsequent discussion of the similarities between secular and theological descriptions of politics as governed by anticipation, response and responsibility rather than simply the unbridled exercise of power.

Charles Curran criticizes this use of the Genesis narratives by arguing that it subverts the impact of the advent of Christ on political ethics. He says, as I noted previously, ‘the political life of man in this world goes on under the sign of Babel and nothing this triumphalistic secular age can do will undo that verdict. Jesus Christ has come into the world and sent his Spirit upon us, but political activity goes on

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<sup>15</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 185. Ramsey speaks elsewhere of the importance of recognizing the roots of war in sin rather than nature. He writes, ‘There also has all along been a realization that wars arise, not from external circumstances or natural laws of biological nature, but from sin. Injustice is a potent source of war. Epistle of James roots wars in greed.’ Unpublished notes, Box 45, The Paul Ramsey Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Perkins-Bostock Library, Duke University.

<sup>16</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 186.

<sup>17</sup> Unpublished notes, Box 45, Ramsey Papers.

much as before under its own sign'.<sup>18</sup> Curran is right to recognize that Ramsey reads these Old Testament stories as revealing eternal truths about the context of political action that remain unchanged by the advent of Christ. Yet, I think he confuses the difference between a Christian political ethic wholly determined by the earthly city and one faithful to the heavenly city in the midst of the earthly one. As I noted in chapter seven, the critical point in Ramsey's correspondence with Arthur Cochrane is his insistence that the limitations of just war are 'to be Christologically reflected upon in the service of life in a fallen world (not derived from the Fall)'.<sup>19</sup> Said another way by David Smith, in his political ethics 'the irrelevance of love ... is the one thing that can never be assumed'.<sup>20</sup> Curran's critical interpretation denies Ramsey the space for the two cities to be intermingled rather than wholly inimical.

Curran also voices concerns that 'there are no balancing remarks about a more positive role of the state'.<sup>21</sup> This overlooks his adoption of the Lutheran view, via Thielicke, that 'enforcement and power are an *alien* work of [God's] mercy'.<sup>22</sup> Government as a preservative ordinance is a positive role of the state stemming from (and ordained by) God's mercy. More importantly, this also overlooks the fact that Ramsey goes farther than Thielicke in his vision for the positive role of the state. David Attwood makes this clear when he says 'there is a world of difference between the typically positive way in which Ramsey speaks of the state's concern to preserve justice and order, and the way in which Thielicke speaks negatively of the

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<sup>18</sup> Charles E. Curran, *Politics, Medicine and Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 14. As Michael McKenzie notes, 'Curran sees Ramsey as letting the "Earthly City" go too much its own way, with too little allowance for justice and love to shape its parameters ... Curran sees Ramsey as walling off the two cities from one another, following Augustine too closely in his pessimism'. *Paul Ramsey's Ethics*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Ramsey to Arthur C. Cochrane, April 6, 1964, Box 3, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>20</sup> David H. Smith, 'Paul Ramsey, Love and Killing', in *Love and Society: Essays in the Ethics of Paul Ramsey*, ed. James T. Johnson and David H. Smith (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 7.

<sup>21</sup> Curran, *Politics*, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 185.

state as an emergency institution'.<sup>23</sup> While Thielicke speaks of 'the demand for the limitation of power', he lacks the tension between limitation, obligation and justification so ubiquitous in Ramsey's writings.<sup>24</sup> His prescriptive norms of the just war theory contain within them moral obligation that assumes a constructive social function to the work of political authority.

A recent article by Shaun Casey revisits and expands Curran's line of attack. His most damaging criticism highlights the way that 'A Political Ethics Context' treats the Babel/Noah narratives in reverse order. Ramsey says, 'the confusion of tongues, taken alone, meant that what happened was bound to happen: that by the time of Noah every imagination of the thoughts of men's hearts was only evil continually'.<sup>25</sup> This implies that the Noahic covenant of Genesis 9 follows the Tower of Babel narrative of Genesis 11. Casey says, 'If the Noah episode displays the depravity of humanity and the need for government, then the Babel story must show that government didn't work very well'.<sup>26</sup> While Casey's point is certainly on target, I am hesitant to conclude that it has a devastating effect on the essential argument that these Genesis narratives teach us about the futility of human strivings in light of divine judgment and the constructive (albeit limited) purpose of government as a good gift of God. Jeffrey Siker attempts a more comprehensive treatment of the role

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<sup>23</sup> David Attwood, *Paul Ramsey's Political Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 1992), 56. McKenzie also takes on Curran's failure to appreciate the constructive work of agape in Ramsey's political ethics. See *Paul Ramsey's Ethics*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 178.

<sup>25</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 185.

<sup>26</sup> Shaun A. Casey, 'Eschatology and Statecraft in Paul Ramsey', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21, no. 2 (2008): 184.

of scripture in Ramsey's ethics and I am content to defer to that study on the question of his quality as an exegetical scholar.<sup>27</sup>

After voicing this initial criticism, Casey derives two further conclusions from Ramsey's use of the Genesis narratives: (1) 'He gives no account of how the duty to love one's neighbor relates to international order and politics'; (2) 'Instead the biblical warrants which are invoked are used to endorse a realist political view'.<sup>28</sup> The second claim is surely correct – Ramsey does use the narratives to endorse a realist political view. The problem is that he would not have thought that he needed to apologize for doing so. Thus, while Casey's term 'realism transforming theology' is meant pejoratively, I suspect Ramsey would have taken it as something of a compliment.<sup>29</sup> As *Who Speaks for the Church* demonstrates, he certainly felt that there was a good deal of modern theology in need of a healthy dose of political realism. This leaves Casey's first claim as the one requiring substantial engagement.

As I mentioned in chapter seven, Ramsey divides 'A Political Ethics Context' into two halves. The first uses the covenant of Noah, the Tower of Babel and a reading of H.R. Niebuhr alongside Thomas Schelling to explain his theological interpretation of the political realm.<sup>30</sup> The second half opens with the heading 'The Morality of War and of Deterrence' and shortly thereafter offers this introductory comment:

The political ethics limits and determination of justice in war's conduct and in deterrence policy I have elaborated elsewhere. Readers who do not know this literature are my loss. That loss cannot be repaired here. I can only

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<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey S. Siker, *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth-Century Portraits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). See also McKenzie's chapter 'The Bible and Paul Ramsey' in *Paul Ramsey's Ethics*, 2-44.

<sup>28</sup> Casey, 'Eschatology and Statecraft', 185.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>30</sup> See H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York, Evanston and London: Harper & Row, 1963); Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

summarize certain theses which I have, I believe, proved elsewhere *in extenso*. The following are conclusions which I believe are demonstrable in any sound ethical reasoning about politics and warfare.<sup>31</sup>

What follows is a summary of his lifelong wrestle with expressions of agape in the political sphere. Discrimination, immunity of non-combatants, proportion, etc. – these are the characteristic elements of purposive agapeic politics. Having already answered the request to ‘say something theological’ in the opening section, and because the piece is composed for a secular audience, he does not explicitly connect each of these principles and ideas to the revelation of Christ or the work of Christian love.<sup>32</sup> But the introductory comment nonetheless serves to make his point – that elsewhere he has proved “*in extenso*” the roots of this political ethic in agape.

Only in light of these claims can we respond to Casey’s suggestion that Ramsey ‘gives no account of how the duty to love one’s neighbor relates to international order and politics’.<sup>33</sup> That is, in point of fact, what the second section of the essay is about. Ramsey’s opening qualification might have been intended to meet such criticisms directly. His work consistently emphasizes both the conditions of purposive political action (*esse*) and the purposive actions themselves (*bene esse*, in accordance with just war criteria). The two halves of ‘A Political Ethics Context’ take precisely this shape. He uses the Genesis narratives to drive his understanding of the context of right political action and then articulates ‘the political ethics limits and determination of justice in war’s conduct’.<sup>34</sup> It is the *esse* and the *bene esse* of political ethics, or, more directly, how agape relates to international order and politics.

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<sup>31</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 197.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 183.

### 8.1.2 Reinventing Covenant and Repentance in ‘A Political Ethics Context’

What I find most striking about Ramsey’s use of the covenant of Noah and the Tower of Babel narratives is the way they reinvent and reintroduce several of the essential elements of his earlier development of covenant and repentance. I want to suggest two ways this takes place. First, the narratives illuminate the tension between divine judgment and human political judgments in a way similar to his appropriation of repentance from the work of H. Richard Niebuhr. The usefulness of repentance as a political concept centers on its ability to uphold the proper function of judgment in the Christian life. It calls attention to the hubris behind our moral endeavors without levelling the norms and principles with which we identify actions as right or wrong. Ramsey uses the Genesis stories to argue similarly that while human striving is always ‘subject to the divine overruling’, the covenant also establishes a proper social function for government operating under norms of justice, law and order.<sup>35</sup>

Consider these later arguments in light of his correspondence in *Dialog* with Robert Hoyer over the issue of repentance (examined in chapter three). Ramsey notes that Hoyer uses justification by faith in Christ to ‘level’ all earthly distinctions between relative (or, ostensible) justice and injustice.<sup>36</sup> McKenzie interprets this comment, saying, ‘Hoyer has confused the horizontal with the vertical. Or better, he has left no room for the horizontal’.<sup>37</sup> In ‘A Political Ethics Context’ Ramsey says, ‘the verdict at Babel only suppressed man’s “vertical” aspiration to high heaven; it

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 184-185.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Ramsey to Kent Knutson, May 10, 1967, Box 14, Ramsey Papers. He adds later, ‘One really cannot suck everything into “justification”, “faith”, “repentance”; or level everything before these grand moments in the Christian life’. The letter was later published as Paul Ramsey, ‘Two Extremes: Ramsey Replies to His Critics’, *Dialog* 6, no. 3 (1967): 218-219.

<sup>37</sup> McKenzie, *Paul Ramsey’s Ethics*, 127.

did nothing to allay the resulting chaos on the horizontal plane'.<sup>38</sup> What did allay that chaos was the institution of government in the covenant of Noah: 'To prevent that vertical turn upward toward unbridled expansion, the law of move and countermove ... was established for the good of mankind always'.<sup>39</sup> In both discussions his principal aim is to maintain the radical transcendence of "vertical" relations between humanity and God without erasing the significance of "horizontal" relations governed by the relative justice of human judgments.

His appropriation of Thielicke's power vs. power interpretation of international politics also draws heavily on the covenant theology examined in chapter five. There I presented his argument that power itself cannot be the *bene esse* of politics – that would endorse the axiom that might is right.<sup>40</sup> Rather, power is the medium by which the political agent moves the community with purpose toward the good. This insistence on the provisional union of power and purpose in moral political agency relies on a prior theological account of systemic ambiguity in human relations across time. While I do not want to retread ground already covered at length, it is significant to recall that he understands human political authority as both unfulfilled and provisional fulfilment because of the ambiguous way it corresponds to the authority of Christ.

Thielicke also objects to the suggestion that power is 'with the *nature* of what is to be done, or whether it is right or wrong', i.e., with the view that might is right.<sup>41</sup>

It is instead connected 'only with the *possibility* of its being done, its capacity for

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<sup>38</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 185.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 186-187. Again, this is not to overlook the difficulties with his reading of the Babel and Noah narratives in reverse order. It is simply to recognize that they are being put to the essentially same theological purpose as his discussion of repentance.

<sup>40</sup> Thus, he insists that 'A political action is always an exercise of power and an exercise of purpose. Power without purpose and purpose without power are both equally nonpolitical'. Ramsey, *The Just War*, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 172.



actualization'.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Ramsey's early use of covenant theology to develop the idea that power is the currency of political progress enables him to envision a constructive political ethic grounded in Thielicke's description of international politics as power vs. power. Although he omits the explicitly Christological appeal in consideration of his secular audience, he puts forth essentially the same argument by using the covenant of Noah and the Tower of Babel to describe government as both unfulfilled ('subjected to the divine overruling') and provisional fulfilment ('commissioned').<sup>43</sup>

Both of these observations demonstrate the way his use of the Genesis narratives reinvents several of the driving theological concepts behind his understanding of covenant and repentance. His sources have shifted from Barth to Thielicke and from the creation stories to the covenant of Noah and the Tower of Babel. The language of repentance has disappeared altogether. Nonetheless, the underlying emphasis on the theological significance of indeterminacy, temporality and judgment remain in tact.

## 8.2 'No Moment More' and the Just War as 'Moral Anguish'

The second focal point I want to examine involves two striking phrases that occur in *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*: "no moment more" and "moral anguish". These terms mark an attempt to reformulate the perspective behind his earlier use of covenant and deferred repentance as political concepts. They also serve to reinforce his emphasis on the theological significance of contingency and temporality as features of political morality.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 184, 185.

In the late 1970s a common topic of discussion among ethicists was the idea that pacifists and just war theorists share a “presumption against violence”. Although he calls that viewpoint ‘mistaken’, Ramsey intends *Speak Up* as a contribution to this discussion by way of a response to documents released by the United Methodist Bishops under the title *In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace*.<sup>44</sup> His principal concern is with its attempt to use the logic of a presumption against violence to transcend the ‘two options for Christian conscience’.<sup>45</sup> Against this claim he proposes an alternative starting point for such an ecumenical discussion.

Ramsey suggests that ‘the one thing Christian pacifists and just warriors have in common is that if anything is shown to be *per se* a moral atrocity, or to have no “just cause” *now*, it should be given Christian endorsement *no moment more*’.<sup>46</sup> He repeats this view later in the discussion, adding, ‘if deterrence is emptied of every possible *moral* justification ... what then should Christians do? That would settle the matter for any traditional pacifist, nuclear pacifist, or just-war Christian’.<sup>47</sup> He recognizes that no anticipation or calculation of justice or peace can justify the perpetration of moral atrocity. Pacifists and just war thinkers are thus united by a “presumption” against moral atrocity rather than violence *per se*.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 63. Ramsey voices the idea that *per se* immoral actions have no place in a Christian account of ethics in *Nine Modern Moralists* in a discussion of whether the concept of ‘objective relatedness to the being of Christ ... need deny the universal and permanent validity of certain ethical principles or hierarchy of values relative to ... [man’s] mode of being in the world’. He gives a ‘loaded illustration’ to prove his point, saying, ‘Surely, at all times and places and under whatever historical circumstances or conditions of personal relationships, rape is wrong. ... This can be said without that “vitiating abstractionism” which separates absolutes “from any being for whom they are valid”’. See Paul Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 173.

While his refusal to identify all acts of violence as moral atrocities may frustrate pacifists who would challenge the distinction, it reflects a common theme in his political writings. It is consistent with his lifelong insistence that ‘it can never be right to do wrong for the sake of some real or supposed good’.<sup>48</sup> Yet it also maintains a category of violence that is morally ambiguous – i.e., that ‘risks’ a conceivable evil in pursuit of a more probable and achievable good.<sup>49</sup> If the choice is *per se* between right and wrong, then a Christian of any ethical persuasion must choose that which is right. But Ramsey believes that political choices are more frequently of an ambiguous sort.

In an early essay from 1960 titled ‘The Politics of Fear’ he distinguishes between evil and the risk of evil in a way that illuminates the phrase “no moment more”.<sup>50</sup> He says that we must make a moral distinction between ‘the great *evil* of all out war and the *risk* of such a war, and between the *evil* of destroying mankind by human action and the *danger* that this may happen’.<sup>51</sup> His point is that the ‘possible effects of modern war must not reduce us to inaction’.<sup>52</sup> *Per se* immoral effects? Yes, they can and may and must reduce us to inaction. But, if we eliminate *a priori* rule violations, then McKenzie is right to note that the following must also be true:

‘Unless a proposed course of action is directly contradictory to the agapic principle,

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<sup>48</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 142. He calls this ‘the meaning of “justice in war” (and its origin our of love-informed-reason)’. He also uses this test as that which distinguishes between ‘legitimate’ and illegitimate’ acts of war (142).

<sup>49</sup> In an unpublished paper from the 1970s he says, ‘Of course, in anything they do statesmen take risks and they often say they are taking “calculated risks”. But if they deliberately take additional risks for peace not on balance in the security and other interests of their nation they should be impeached’. Ramsey, ‘A New Understanding of National Security’, Box 39, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘The Politics of Fear’ *Worldview* 3, no. 3 (1930): 4-7. This essay is reprinted in Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961) under the title, ‘The Politics of Fear, or, the End Is Not Yet’.

<sup>51</sup> Ramsey, ‘The Politics of Fear’, 5. He continues later, ‘to choose liberty by means that could conceivably threaten the existence of mankind ... is not yet the same as choosing death’ (5).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. The magistrate ‘does what he can and may and must, without regarding himself as lord of the future or, on the other hand, as covered with guilt by accident or unforeseen circumstances’ (7).

then it cannot be ruled out *a priori*'.<sup>53</sup> Contingent and unpredictable possibilities must not be allowed to paralyze the Christian pursuit of political good.

The difficulty for Christian political ethics is not that there are actions which are inherently wrong but must be done anyway (i.e., a kind of sinister consequentialism). Rather, the problem is that politics trades in a number of currencies which are unavoidably ambiguous in their potential for moral good or evil (i.e., they cannot be classified as immoral *per se* or unjust *now*). The most fundamental point of agreement between pacifists and just war thinkers is a promise to consider certainly immoral acts "no moment more". Beyond that promise is a realm of uncertain, ambiguous and unpredictable actions that, in Ramsey's mind, represent the true point of contention in the pacifist/just war debate.

The categorical limits set by the promise to consider immoral acts "no moment more" generates his concept of "moral anguish". His introduction of the term in *Speak Up* follows upon an expression of frustration with the idea that just-war criteria can coolly be applied as 'a thoughtless, legalistic way of condemning all wars at one time, and any war test-by-test'.<sup>54</sup> This viewpoint is particularly susceptible to the 'most deplorable failure' of omitting 'any sense of tragedy or sorrow Christians have to endure, and should cultivate under the tutelage of these norms'.<sup>55</sup> "Tragedy" does not describe the performance of immoral acts with a heavy heart. Rather, it describes the situation where 'resort to violence in a palpably just cause cries to high heaven for us to rescue the perishing and *we cannot do so* because

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<sup>53</sup> McKenzie, *Paul Ramsey's Ethics*, 49.

<sup>54</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 71.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-72.

in the attempt greater evil would be caused than prevented or corrected'.<sup>56</sup> Tragedy is thus the pain of a conscience restrained by just war limitations in the face of moral atrocity.

Within this emphasis on 'the sense of tragedy inculcated by a proper use of just-war political wisdom', Ramsey describes '*moral anguish* over inevitable clashes between *justice*-reasons for going to war and *disproportion*-reasons prohibiting it'.<sup>57</sup> What is remarkable about this claim is that he assumes that pain of conscience in the face of moral atrocity is something that the Christian magistrate 'should cultivate' while under the restraints of just war criteria.<sup>58</sup> What he describes is a point more often reserved for criticism of pacifists. The standard popular and intuitive challenge to a pacifist ethic is the question, 'How can you stand by and do nothing while others suffer injustice?' Ramsey takes that challenge as a litmus test for the work of just war principles upon the conscience of the Christian magistrate.<sup>59</sup>

This becomes evident in his claim that 'the sounder our understanding, the more the moral anguish over suffering we *ought* to let continue *unrelieved* because to topple the oppressor would bring on as great or greater suffering'.<sup>60</sup> "Moral anguish" requires 'thoughtful reflection on the "just" and right thing to do' because of the

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 72. Thielicke also tries to alter the definition of tragedy when he says 'Man speaks of the tragic necessity of events when he ought to speak instead of the error of his own ways and the evil of his own choices'. *Theological Ethics*, 175. Earlier in his career Ramsey made a similar distinction by rejecting the idea that 'murder' can be described as something 'tragic'. See *War and the Christian Conscience*, 213; *The Just War*, 159.

<sup>57</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 72. I am not sure what D. Stephen Long means when he says 'before tragedy, there was moral anguish' in his commentary on Ramsey's early work from the 1940s. Nor am I aware of the phrase appearing before 1988 with the publication of *Speak Up. Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism: The Ethics of Paul Ramsey* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 44.

<sup>58</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 72.

<sup>59</sup> Ramsey expresses similar sentiments in his early work, saying, 'The test is whether we are willing to limit ends and means in warfare and yet sustain the burden of this evil necessity, whether we as a people are willing, if war comes, to accept defeat when our fighters cannot win the hoped-for victory rather than venture more and exact more than the nature of just endurable warfare requires, whether we can mount the resources for action with at most small effect and plan surrender when none is possible'. *War and the Christian Conscience*, 151-152.

<sup>60</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 72.

‘tension among just-war teachings, by the fact that we are obliged to observe all the norms’.<sup>61</sup> It is evidence that the moral norms prescribed by covenant fidelity are weighing appropriately on the (justifiable) options for purposive political action. It is also evidence of faithful protection of the neighbor in a world of conflicting political relations.

The tension of “moral anguish” is characterized by a proper understanding of obligation, justification and limitation in the political realm. Ramsey combines this account with the insistence that anything known to be *per se* morally atrocious is to be considered “no moment more”. Holding these two elements together brings into view a proper understanding of Christian political responsibility. In an unpublished paper from the 1970s he observes, ‘theological ethics, of course, must go as far as it can (and therefore only as far as it can) in clarifying the meaning of political responsibility’.<sup>62</sup> The combination of limitations – “only as far as it can” – as well as justification – “as far as it can” – and obligation – “must go” – describes the balance that characterizes “moral anguish” and actions considered “no moment more”. Together they reflect the necessary elements of responsibly purposive political agency.

### **8.2.1 Rethinking Covenant and Repentance in ‘No Moment More’ and ‘Moral Anguish’**

While these terms are new, the driving theological and political concepts appear throughout Ramsey’s earlier work. For instance, he expresses an essentially

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 73. The description of tragedy and “moral anguish” here should be sufficient to demonstrate that D.S. Long has his own purposes in mind when he suggests that Ramsey has replaced an account of sin with a pagan notion of tragedy. Tragedy here is not related to sinful acts, but to faithful restraint from immoral action in a broken political realm. See Long, *Tragedy*, 40, n. 40.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘Apologia Pro Vita Sua – One decade, that is’, Box 39, Ramsey Papers.

similar view in the introduction to *War and the Christian Conscience*, saying, ‘it was to be expected that political vocation and participation in war, if these were justified and motivated by what love required the Christian to do, would at the same time be surrounded by very severe limits on what love permitted him to do’.<sup>63</sup> Or, as he frequently reiterates, ‘what justified also limited!’<sup>64</sup> At the same time, however, selected statements in his early work fail to make his sensitivity to the limits of political action explicitly clear.

David H. Smith brings to light one example of this in his parallel reading of Ramsey and Aquinas in ‘Paul Ramsey, Love and Killing’. He calls attention to the early declarations in *Basic Christian Ethics* that in service to the neighbor ‘all things are now lawful, all things are now permitted’.<sup>65</sup> He says, ‘it would make sense for Aquinas to describe a case of a neighbor who “needed” saving, yet whom one could not save as an act of charity, since the saving act was sinful. For Ramsey the total commitment to neighbor entailed by agape makes such a limitation of the requirements of love a contradiction in terms’.<sup>66</sup> The account of “moral anguish” certainly marks a departure from this view inasmuch as Ramsey explicitly describes the tension of obligation, justification and limitation in political endeavors. His definition of tragedy is based on the inability to intervene in a ‘palpably just cause’ from restraint by the moral limits to justified war.<sup>67</sup>

Another principal example is his suggestion that in the political realm ‘repentance may have to be deferred’.<sup>68</sup> As I observed in the first section of this

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<sup>63</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, xviii – xix.

<sup>64</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 143.

<sup>65</sup> Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950), 184.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, ‘Paul Ramsey’, 9.

<sup>67</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 72.

<sup>68</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 12.

study, both David Little and John Hick interpret this claim to be a temporary suspension of moral norms governing political endeavors.<sup>69</sup> Ramsey's account of deferred repentance and the early distinction between the private capacity of the individual and the public capacity of the political official unnecessarily obscures his unequivocal rejection of immoral policies and actions. His later work in *Speak Up* makes this clearer by simply stating that 'if anything is shown to be *per se* a moral atrocity ... it should be given Christian endorsement *no moment more*'.<sup>70</sup>

This marks the first of two ways in which "moral anguish" and "no moment more" reformulate and reintroduce the essential elements of his discussion of covenant and repentance. His later work drops the problematic suggestion that moral norms can be temporarily suspended while retaining the proper sensitivity to the unpredictability and systemic contingency of the political realm. His emphasis on the tension of political office wrought by allegiance to just war norms is repackaged in "moral anguish" without the baggage of his creative (and, at times, troubling) reinterpretation of the theological category of repentance.

The second reintroduction of earlier theological concepts involves his use of covenant to emphasize political decision-making. In chapter six I described covenant as the source of temporal and interpersonal bonds that determine our moral responsibilities. As Marcia Sichol observes, 'covenant fidelity' reveals 'the limits within which discretion takes place'.<sup>71</sup> This means that judgments on moral or

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<sup>69</sup> David Little, 'The Structure of Justification in the Political Ethics of Paul Ramsey', in *Love and Society*, ed. James T. Johnson and David H. Smith (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 139-162; John Hick to Paul Ramsey, June 27, 1961, Box 11, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>70</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 52.

<sup>71</sup> Marcia Sichol, *Making of a Nuclear Peace* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 33. Or, as William R. Stevenson Jr. notes, 'the delineation of the moral limits on warfare "is the context for policy decision" and not the policy decision itself'. *Christian Love and Just War: Moral Paradox and Political Life in St. Augustine and His Modern Interpreters* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 130.



immoral actions are only possible within a sustained ethos of normative moral principles. Alongside these formal limitations set by covenant is the distinctive role of properly framed and informed choice in the Christian moral life. Ramsey's sensitivity to the importance of such choice becomes most clear in his protection of the magistrate's conscience from being 'faulted' in *Who Speaks for the Church?*<sup>72</sup>

These same themes run throughout his political discussion in *Speak Up*. The firm rejection of actions to be considered "no moment more" demarcates the formal moral limitations on political agency. At the same time, Ramsey pairs this with a description of 'the moral anguish of placing oneself under obligation to all the rules of warfare'.<sup>73</sup> Whereas his principal concern in *Who Speaks* is to protect the magistrate from the particular pronouncements of the church, the concept of "moral anguish" functions as a litmus test for the work of just war principles upon the Christian conscience. With this move "no moment more" and "moral anguish" reinterpret the theological impulse behind *Who Speaks* to offer an alternative account of just war limitations more explicitly directed at holding moral agents in the political realm accountable for Christian standards of justice.

### 8.3 Connecting Covenant and Repentance

Calling attention to these two focal points in Ramsey's later writings serves an important function for the argument at hand by identifying several of the enduring elements of his political theology. For instance, they highlight his consistent emphasis on the contingency of political endeavors, uncompromising insistence on the moral norms governing political action and appreciation for the role of judgment

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<sup>72</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Who Speaks for the Church? A Critique of the 1966 Geneva Conference on Church and Society* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1967), 108.

<sup>73</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 72.

in the proper exercise of political authority. At the same time, other elements of the preceding discussion recede as his audience changes. The strong emphasis on temporality and the movement of the political community through time recedes in *Speak Up* as he moves away from the debates on situation ethics in the sixties. Similarly, the secular audience of ‘A Political Ethics Context’ also drives him away from the explicitly Christological ground of just war limitations on political violence.

I want to begin drawing together these essential features in order to make several observations about the convergence of covenant and repentance in Ramsey’s political theology. As I mentioned above, there is no summative piece of writing from the end of his career which plainly draws together his thinking on covenant and repentance. However, there is one particular story that he repeats in a number of different settings to hone in on the essential features of his theological perspective. I believe it captures his most important contributions to political theology.

### 8.3.1 Taking Counsel and Counting the Costs

On April 9, 1967 Ramsey delivered a sermon at the National (Episcopal) Cathedral in Washington, D.C. He titled it ‘Counting the Costs’ and took as his text the story of the builder and the king from Luke 14. Later that year it was published in *The Vietnam War: Christian Perspectives*.<sup>74</sup> The following year he placed the essay at the conclusion of *The Just War* and then used the narrative in ‘Force and Political Responsibility’ in 1972.<sup>75</sup> Again in 1973 he repeated the story in the publication of

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<sup>74</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘Counting the Costs’, in *The Vietnam War: Christian Perspectives*, ed. Michael Hamilton (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1967). 24-44. There is a manuscript of ‘Counting the Costs’ from 1967 in a folder of writings and speeches in Box 38, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>75</sup> See Ramsey, *The Just War*, 523-536; Paul Ramsey, ‘Force and Political Responsibility’, in *Ethics and World Politics: Four Perspectives*, ed., Ernest W. Lefever (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 48-51.

‘A Political Ethics Context’ in *Strategic Thinking and its Moral Implications* (which was then placed as an appendix to *Speak Up* in 1988).<sup>76</sup>

Given his evident fondness of the story and appreciation for its appeal to widely divergent audiences, it is worth considering at length what it reveals about his political theology. I will first reprint the text from Luke 14 that he takes as his prompt in order to frame his interpretation of its wisdom:

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build, and was not able to finish’. Or what king, going to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand men to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends an embassy and asks terms of peace. So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.<sup>77</sup>

Ramsey initially distinguishes between disciples, on one hand, and kings and builders, on the other. Disciples are principally allegiant to the kingdom of God, which ‘is not a pearl of great price; it is a pearl of *inestimable* price for which one sells *all* that he has’.<sup>78</sup> The kind of “calculation” required of discipleship is, in fact, not calculated at all. It is impassioned, reckless and in radical service to those in need. Against this approach is that of the kings and builders who ‘determine whether the costs are worth it in a world in which nothing is worth everything’.<sup>79</sup> Their path is one defined by the need for precise calculation and management of resources in an imprecise (read: contingent) world.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> See Kaplan, ed., *Strategic Thinking*, 101-147; Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 193-194.

<sup>77</sup> Luke 14: 28-33, taken from *The Just War*, 523.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Thus, he says, ‘the task of the statesman and builder is, in a sense, a more calculating one; it requires ... more exactitude amid less certitude and greater ambiguity in measuring costs to goods that are irremediably relative’. Ibid., 523-524.

This principal description of faithful discipleship, he indicates, is the ‘main point’ of the parable.<sup>81</sup> Yet, he also appreciates the distinction between the tower-builder and the king as one between ‘two sorts of worldly wisdom’.<sup>82</sup> This stems from the fact that even within the realm of worldly pursuits there are varying degrees of contingency and various requirements according to one’s social role.

What is required of the tower-builder is a ‘comparatively simple calculation, and one that can be tallied up ahead of time’.<sup>83</sup> He is ‘the builder of a project that he can control or complete’.<sup>84</sup> This approach draws upon a kind of consequentialist logic and Ramsey speaks of the ‘ascendancy of technical reason in cost-counting’.<sup>85</sup> A builder weighs and estimates each aspect of the project before initiating construction. Furthermore, there is a point at which the building is complete. Thus, in the parable Jesus indicates that those builders who fail to calculate rightly will be mocked.<sup>86</sup>

The wisdom of the king is composed of taking counsel rather than counting costs. On one hand, this stems from the fact that the king already operates within a world of pre-existing political relations. Even though Jesus describes the king ‘first’ sitting down to take counsel, Ramsey notes that, ‘a very peculiar “first” that would

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<sup>81</sup> Ramsey, ‘Force and Political Responsibility’, 49. He also says, Jesus ‘remarks upon this world in which the costs and expected goods *can* be *compared*; yet he by these references does not *speak* of these things but instead of man’s ultimate good and its inestimable worth’. *The Just War*, 524.

<sup>82</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 193.

<sup>83</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 525. The builder has ‘a manageable calculation to make’. *Speak Up*, 193.

<sup>84</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 526.

<sup>85</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 194.

<sup>86</sup> Ramsey says, ‘in tower-building your calculations can all be made in advance; and if you fail to complete it you can clearly be mocked, as Jesus said, by all those who see the useless foundation you laid’. *The Just War*, 525.

be, while he is already going to “encounter” another king!<sup>87</sup> Thus he says that a king operates ‘in the midst of the interaction and forces already at play in the world’.<sup>88</sup>

On the other hand, the king also takes counsel rather than counting costs because statecraft lacks the control and precision of tower-building: ‘In politics there are no completed towers’.<sup>89</sup> For this reason, ‘Jesus spoke not of measurable calculation, or proof or disproof of one’s ability to finish an edifice, when he mentioned the predicament of a king. Instead a king or statesman needs wise “counsel”’.<sup>90</sup> While both kings and builders operate in worlds that require calculation, the radical indeterminacy and unpredictability of political endeavors means that kings can only take counsel on the course they should follow. In Ramsey’s words, the king ‘cannot very clearly count the costs because he cannot – he simply cannot – predestinate the benefits he seeks’.<sup>91</sup>

Two examples will here help demonstrate the logic behind Ramsey’s interpretation of the parable. First, in ‘Force and Political Responsibility’ he cites a line from former U.S. Secretary of State and furniture-making hobbyist Dean Acheson, who said, ‘a chair is made to sit in: when you’ve made it you can tell whether you made it right; there is no such definitive test of the rightfulness of a political policy-decision’.<sup>92</sup> Second, he observes in ‘The Politics of Fear’, that ‘in prudential calculation, in balancing the good directly intended and done against the evil unintended and indirectly done, no greater precision can be forthcoming than the

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. ‘A statesman must always, unlike builders of towers, posit his decision and action in a world in which there is always the action, interaction, and counteraction of others and other forces and influences coming upon him’. ‘Force and Political Responsibility’, 50.

<sup>89</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 194. He says, ‘The international system may be a Babel, but it is not a tower’.

<sup>90</sup> Ramsey, ‘Force and Political Responsibility’, 49.

<sup>91</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 526.

<sup>92</sup> Ramsey, ‘Force and Political Responsibility’, 49.

subject allows’.<sup>93</sup> The precision inherent in chair-making simply cannot be mapped upon the task of statecraft. There is no way to “sit” in a policy to see if it has been made rightly. At the same time, there remains a distinct place for calculation in the work of the magistrate. His point is that political actions can only be judged according to the precision appropriate to the subject.

### 8.3.2 Politics as a Kind of Doing

Ramsey summarizes these observations on the nature of political morality by saying that ‘politics is a kind of *doing*. It is not a kind of *making* – like building a tower’.<sup>94</sup> We can observe three fundamental truths about the political realm that he draws from the narrative in Luke 14 and the idea that politics is a kind of doing. They have also emerged in this study as essential features of his use of covenant and repentance.

First, the political realm is inescapably temporal – that is, it is characterized and governed by its movement through time. This explains why ‘Jesus described the king as already in movement’.<sup>95</sup> Ramsey attempts to describe the modern version of this political situation, saying,

Our Presidents simply are not tower-builders. This is simply not the nature of the encounters coming upon the statesman into which he is always going or the nature of an arbitrament of arms. ... Instead there must be a ceaseless and perhaps changing appraisal of the stakes at issue and a ceaseless and perhaps changing appraisal of the costs proportionate to what is at stake, going on at the same time action is being put forth in the context of the actions coming upon us, itself shaping and shaped by those actions’.

<sup>93</sup> Ramsey, ‘The Politics of Fear’, 6.

<sup>94</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 525. He notes in a footnote in the original publication of ‘A Political Ethics Context’: ‘And finally, of course, the strategist submits his reasoning and analysis to political “counsel” for decision and action ... In this, pride of place is accorded to what Aristotle called “doing” (ethics and politics) in contrast to “art”: “making” or designing systems and artifacts. That was Aristotle’s most important distinction – whether or not “art” is now “science” and “science” “art”. See Kaplan, ed., *Strategic Thinking*, 113.

<sup>95</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 525.

Temporal moral relations and a continual flow of actions and reactions surround every new political initiative. There are also matters of timing, patience and expediency involved in prudential determinations of effective action. These elements of the biblical narrative and the modern political situation reflect what it means for magistrates to operate ‘in a world whose *steady state* is that of encountering powers’.<sup>96</sup>

The temporal nature of political pursuits has been a persistent theme in this discussion of covenant and repentance in Ramsey’s political theology. However awkwardly the term may fit its appointed function, one original purpose for his introduction of “deferred repentance” is a desire to account for the role of timing in pursuit of effective action. This is why it is a practice for the “meantime” but “not forever”. He also inherits from H. Richard Niebuhr a distinct sensitivity to the fact that working for political good may require patience or calculated inactivity. The theological discussion in ‘The Manger, the Cross, and the Resurrection’ is precisely an attempt to understand repentance as an obedient response perpetually shaping our lives through time rather than merely a reactive response continually subsequent to disobedience.<sup>97</sup>

Further, his use of covenant draws out the moral significance of the temporal bonds defining and governing political relations. There is a structure to political acts of judgment which relies on our movement through time. When emphasizing eschatology this emerges as an appreciation for ‘taking *time* seriously as a relation

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Paul Ramsey, ‘The Manger, the Cross, and the Resurrection’ *Christianity in Crisis* 3, no. 4 (1943): 2-5. That is why he says, ‘More fundamental than sorrow for our past sins is a repentant faith which *in acting nevertheless waits* for the Lord to complete by His Divine Providence the goodness of our finite actions, and which still trusts Him when in His Divine Judgment our action is thwarted and rejected’ (4).

among creatures and the measure of the activity of creatures’.<sup>98</sup> As he moves toward Christology this produces a description of historical time as the good gift of God sustained by the Spirit of Christ until the final judgment. As I noted in chapter five, this gift of time witnesses to the kingdom of God and makes possible faithful creaturely response to that kingdom.

The second fundamental element to be drawn from the claim that politics is a kind of doing is that the political realm is characterized by radical contingency. The indented quotation above observes that magistrates, like kings, operate in a world where all action is reaction, and all responsibility is to some degree based on anticipation of other responses. This means that ‘statecraft is not primarily a matter of social engineering, of building institutions; it is rather a system of interacting *doings*’.<sup>99</sup> He elaborates this point, insisting that the king will make judgments that are both ‘risk-filled’ and ‘unmeasurable’, yet ‘creative’ – this is what it means to live ‘in a world of *doing*’.<sup>100</sup> Even when the magistrate judges rightly, there are layers of contingency and indeterminacy which may yet prevent that right judgment from leading to the desired or intended result.

Yet, his attention to contingency as a feature of political morality produces, perhaps counter-intuitively, a heightened sensitivity to the importance of political judgments. He is equally suspicious of those who abandon political relations to moral chaos or conflicts of unrestrained power as he is of those who believe they can be controlled by ‘technical reason’.<sup>101</sup> What is most important to keep clear is that

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<sup>98</sup> Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists*, 69. Or, as he writes in *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, ‘God who created me ... at the same time gave me a nature in the form of fellow humanity in the historical time and space of my existence in covenant’. *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, 37-38.

<sup>99</sup> Ramsey, ‘Force and Political Responsibility’, 50.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>101</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 194.



when the systemic ambiguity of political relations is understood rightly, then ‘decision and action can be what they are worth’.<sup>102</sup>

This theme also emerges continually in the discussion of covenant and repentance. In chapter five I highlighted the fact that political action is given Christian *purpose* only when it embraces the ambiguity of our lives by acting decisively in the direction of the *bene esse* of politics. This does not mean that all political judgments are right and good. Instead, it demonstrates how the indeterminacy of our political existence makes possible faithful obedience to a God who also rules with particularity in a contingent world.<sup>103</sup> This builds upon the foundational notion that the pattern for faithful obedience to the God of covenant is found in God’s faithfulness to Israel and to his creation (examined in chapter four).<sup>104</sup>

The notion of deferred repentance also stems from his description of politics as “the science of the possible”. He wrestles with David Little over what it means for politics to be “systematically indeterminate” and inherits Niebuhr’s insistence that judgments of guilt and innocence in war are always relative in light of the judgment of God. In the development of his just war theory, as well as in debates over the Vietnam conflict, this translates into a belief that the essential task of political ethics

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<sup>102</sup> Ramsey, ‘Turn Toward Just War’, 9. He continues, ‘This only *de-mythologizes* the role of politics, and men are free to think of it as highly as they ought to think, and not make unearthly demands of it’.

<sup>103</sup> He notes just prior to a discussion of Luke 14, ‘In their capacities as “magistrates” men exercise creative rulership. Political decision and action is in *the image of God*, who also rules by particular decrees. God does not create a world in general; he creates a specific world out of myriad possibilities that might have been. ... The political act calls the things that are to be into being from things that are not’. ‘Force and Political Responsibility’, 47.

<sup>104</sup> Ramsey sustains this notion late into his career, saying, ‘Jewish and Christian ethics makes ultimate appeal to a divine performance as the ground for and the source of the core-content of men’s correlative obligations to one another’. ‘Kant’s Moral Theology or Religious Ethics’, in *The Roots of Ethics*, ed. Daniel Callahan and H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr. (New York: Plenum Press, 1981), 163.

is to sustain the moral criteria necessary to govern and inform those relative judgments.

Lastly, Ramsey's interpretation of the Luke 14 narrative exhibits his fundamental belief that the contingency and temporality of the political realm are *theologically* significant. On one hand, he acknowledges at several points that Jesus' description of the political realm is made "in passing". He also notes that 'these words uttered by the Lord of Heaven and Earth ... do more than *point the way* politics should go. Those words also bring under judgment the whole of humankind and they reveal in one lightening flash that ours is a fallen existence'.<sup>105</sup> This sustains the transcendence of the judgment of God and the radical depravity of all political communities.

On the other hand he believes that as Jesus reflects on the king and the builder he 'in some sense and even if in passing commended their practical wisdom and took note of its nature'.<sup>106</sup> He elaborates this point later, saying,

Jesus said a significant word about the *nature* of this political wisdom: it is largely a matter of correctly counting the costs in relation to the goods to be obtained. This is, in fact, a principal word that through all the centuries Christians have addressed to the world, and to themselves in their offices as magistrate or citizen.<sup>107</sup>

In making this claim he does not go back on the point of contrast between builders who count costs and kings who take counsel. Rather, he is reverting to the original distinction between disciples (for whom the kingdom of God is 'of *inestimable* price') and kings and builders who 'determine whether the costs are worth it in a

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<sup>105</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 529. He also expresses this by saying 'Our first solidarity is the unity we have with all mankind in suffering, sin and guilt. For Christians there is nothing surprising in this assertion' (530).

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 524.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

world in which nothing is worth everything'.<sup>108</sup> He takes Jesus' commendation of the political wisdom of the king to "point the way" toward relative human judgments made in pursuit of limited political goods.

Ramsey reads Luke 14 as support for his belief that the nature of the political realm – its structure, purposes and limitations – are determined by Christ. In doing so he calls attention both to the transcendent judgment of God and to the role of relative judgments in political communities. This includes his recognition of the inescapable contingency and temporality of those relative judgments, as witnessed in his description of the king as one who "takes counsel".

This theological emphasis, too, has been a persistent theme of the preceding discussion of Ramsey's development as a political thinker. The rationale for the juxtaposition of covenant and repentance in this study takes shape here, in their ability to articulate the particular features of political morality which he finds theologically significant. Both concepts sustain his emphasis on contingency and temporality as inherent aspects of the structure of the political act. That structure gains its theological significance from the fact that it is under the judgment of God and simultaneously instituted by God to make possible faithful creaturely response in the time before the final judgment. His reading of Luke 14 reflects the way that Ramsey is able to harness the ambiguity and temporality of political endeavors within a theological account of a Christian political ethic. Covenant and repentance converge in the way that they illuminate the theological significance of his belief that the political act is not simply doing, but a kind of doing. It is a contingent and temporal kind of doing and in that also, a Christian kind of doing.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

### **Politics is a Kind of Doing**

Ramsey uses a wide variety of terms and phrases to capture his perspective on the political realm. As early as the 1940s he takes note of ‘the structure of the political moment’.<sup>1</sup> He calls the just war theory ‘a study of moral decision-making’ in *War and the Christian Conscience*.<sup>2</sup> He also speaks of ‘a proper *political act*’ in *The Just War*.<sup>3</sup> I have highlighted one of these phrases – politics is a kind of doing – to exhibit his belief that political morality is structured by the pursuit of goods within a context of contingent and temporally determined relations. What his theology of covenant and repentance makes clear is that these features are theologically essential to the movement of created existence across time. Ramsey pulls back the curtain on political ambiguity and temporality to reveal that they have, in fact, deeply theological purposes.

To say this another way, he understands that in order for moral agency to be moral it must also be indeterminate and temporal. What he said so frequently of principles of war applies also to these features of political agency: that which justifies also limits!<sup>4</sup> Their theological significance for the pursuit of the political good came most explicitly into view in his belief that political action is given Christian purpose only when it embraces the ambiguity of the time before the final

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ramsey, lecture notes on Principles of Christian Ethics, Box 35, The Paul Ramsey Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Perkins-Bostock Library, Duke University.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961), xxiii.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ramsey, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968; reprint, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1983), xix.

<sup>4</sup> Ramsey says elsewhere that supplying an adequate account of the context of moral agency ‘far from inaugurating ethical anarchy and irresponsibility actually proves to be the decisive breakthrough to the ethical integrity of behavior’. ‘Christian Freedom and the Ethical Reality of Conscience’, May, 1963, Box 46, Ramsey Papers, 11.

judgment by acting decisively in the direction of the *bene esse* of politics. As features of our created existence toward covenant, the contingency and temporality of political endeavors is itself a witness to the kingdom of God because it makes possible faithful obedience to that kingdom.

This, I believe, is what we learn from taking Ramsey seriously as a political theologian. It has been the aim of this study across the previous eight chapters to highlight the way covenant and repentance bring together these theological claims about the nature of the political realm. He describes the shape of political morality with terms and concepts inherited from Barth, H. Richard Niebuhr, Rousseau, Thielicke, etc. What I have tried to demonstrate, however, is the way in which he at the same time supplies a new and constructive direction to those themes by developing his own distinctive theological account of the structures governing political morality. The interpretive gains of this reading offer scholarship on Ramsey an explicit account of his contributions to political theology via an emphasis on constructive action and pursuit of right policy within the unique limitations of political agency.

To conclude I want to appreciate these gains by considering them in light of one theme that has been lurking in the background through several elements of this study: the relationship between Ramsey and the political theology of Hugo Grotius. As I noted in chapter four, he does not seem to have interacted much with Grotius, citing him in print only in *Basic Christian Ethics* in conjunction with Jean Bodin.<sup>5</sup> Yet, we do know that he was assigned to read sections from *The Right of War and Peace* in his courses at Yale with C.W. Hendel and that Hendel's reading

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 381.

emphasized the importance of establishing political sovereignty.<sup>6</sup> While in the initial sections of this study I have only been able to gesture in the direction of similarities in their thinking, I want to conclude by probing a few key Grotian concepts for the significant insight they yield into the shape of Ramsey's contributions to political theology. This will help both to reflect on the accomplishments of this study and to point the way forward to other potentially significant areas of inquiry into Ramsey as political theologian.

As a point of departure, I believe there is much to be said about his relationship to democracy, particularly in light of his similarities with Grotius. Recall that his early use of the social contract begins with an attraction to Rousseau's ability to emphasize democracy as the most adequate form of government in response to sin. He reinforces this belief at length in an article from 1946, 'A Theory of Democracy: Idealistic or Christian?'<sup>7</sup> In response he receives criticisms for having a liberal allegiance to democracy which trumps his theological allegiance to Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, as noted in chapter four, he becomes dissatisfied with Rousseau and warns against a wholesale embrace of democracy. He notes in unpublished materials from the 1940s, 'the Hebraic-Christian tradition in political theory is not to be equated with democracy, because it refuses to absolutize anything human, even the

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<sup>6</sup> See Box 43 of the Ramsey Papers, as well as Kevin Carnahan, 'Sin, Guilt, Justice and War: Paul Ramsey and Reinhold Niebuhr on the Moral Framework for Just War Thought', Ph.D. diss., Southern Methodist University, 2007, 27-29. LeRoy Walters discusses both thinkers, albeit separately, in 'Historical Applications of the Just War Theory: Four Case Studies in Normative Ethics', in *Love and Society: Essays in the Ethics of Paul Ramsey*, ed. David H. Smith and James T. Johnson, (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 115-138.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Ramsey, 'A Theory of Democracy: Idealistic or Christian?', *Ethics* 56, no. 4 (1946): 251-266.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, D. Stephen Long uses the phrase 'metaphysics of democracy' to capture his early support of democracy as a hedge against sin and totalitarianism. He also claims that it is a governing principle for all of Ramsey's political writings that 'stays with him till the end'. *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism: The Ethics of Paul Ramsey* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 31.

will of the people’.<sup>9</sup> I have tried to show that his elevation of the representative authority of the magistrate has more to do with his reverence for the distinctive contingency and temporality of political deliberation and judgment than with a commitment to the superiority of counting every vote (though there are certainly statements from his early writings which may obscure this point).

Recognition of similarities between Ramsey and Grotius on themes of political representation and authority has the ability to call into question his allegiance to liberal democracy. This is because it highlights the fact that his theological perspective on politics contains relatively few explicitly democratic features. Said another way, does Ramsey’s magistrate have to be democratically elected? His emphasis on the theological significance of contingency and temporality applies to political authority of any legitimate kind.<sup>10</sup> This is indicated in part by his preference for the language of political “magistrates”. Comparison with Grotius reveals that even his most explicit moral norms for politics – justice, proportion, discrimination, etc. – are not inherently tied to democratically elected political authority.

This initial set of questions regarding the supposed liberal lineage of his theological insights on politics, however, begs an additional and more fundamental set regarding his inheritance of a Grotian model of justice, political judgment and representative authority. In order to address these questions I want to turn, perhaps unexpectedly, to features of Grotius’ theological epistemology. I believe the way he

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<sup>9</sup> Unpublished notes, Box 42, Ramsey Papers. As noted in chapter four, he informally writes ‘uncritically’ in the margins between ‘not to be’ and ‘equated’.

<sup>10</sup> In a later commentary on democracy he maintains that ‘the fabric of political society still endures ... the democratization of magisterial initiative has not made every man his own government’. Paul Ramsey, ‘Some Rejoinders’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 4, no. 2 (1976): 188.

explains the interrelation of the intellect and the will to be an apt analogy for the way that Ramsey frames his theological perspective on politics.

### An Analogy with Hugo Grotius

Leonard Besselink's essay 'The Impious Hypothesis Revisited' sets out to examine Grotius' infamous "impious hypothesis" in light of his wider epistemological commitments.<sup>11</sup> The hypothesis, of course, is his claim in *The Right of War and Peace* that 'these observations would have a place even were we to accept the infamous premise that God did not exist'.<sup>12</sup> Because this claim is so frequently taken to imply his rejection of 'the analogy in the being of God and man', Besselink sets out to prove that Grotius, in fact, did adhere to belief in such an analogy.<sup>13</sup> His task leads him beyond the major legal works into Grotius' lesser-known writings, namely, his poetry, biblical commentaries and correspondence.<sup>14</sup>

What is important about this essay for the task at hand is that he provides a clear exposition of Grotius' theological perspective on the relationship between the intellect and the will, as well as an account of the epistemological function of judgment. While I do not claim the expertise to independently interpret those more

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<sup>11</sup> See Leonard Besselink, 'The Impious Hypothesis Revisited', in *Grotius*, vol. 2, ed. John Dunn and Ian Harris (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 1997), 514-574. The aim of the essay is to 'try to establish the meaning of the role which will and intellect play in the literary context of Grotius' impious hypothesis' (521).

<sup>12</sup> Hugo Grotius, 'The Right of War and Peace', in *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought*, ed. Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 794. This selection is taken from the prolegomena, section eleven.

<sup>13</sup> Besselink, 'Impious Hypothesis', 526.

<sup>14</sup> He provides this formal (and helpful) statement of his project: 'Thus the alleged refutation by Grotius of the *analogia entis* and the related idea of the *lex aeterna* ... requires a discussion of points of view which Grotius does not explicitly touch upon in *De iure belli ac pacis* and other legal works but which he does indeed tackle in the often neglected poetical works, in his biblical commentaries and in his correspondence. In fact precisely these texts make it possible to acquire some insight in the anthropological and theological psychology which must be at the basis of the position taken by Grotius on the respective roles of will and intellect in God and man; in other words, it is the analogy in the being of God and man'. Ibid., 522.



obscure writings, I believe Besselink offers a number of helpful observations that we can employ to gain insight into Ramsey's own latent epistemology. As mentioned above, Grotius' understanding of the interrelation of the intellect and the will offers an apt analogy for the way that Ramsey frames his theological perspective on politics.

Besselink draws from a number of Grotius' minor works, including one of his three biblical dramas, *Adamus Exul*, his commentary on the Gospel of John, two Eucharistic poems and an obscure work from *Opera Theologica* titled *De fide et operibus*.<sup>15</sup> On the basis of insight from these writings he points to the following theological/epistemological structure:

Father	Son	Spirit
mind	intellect	will
cause	truth	good

He observes the Augustinian shape of the analogy as a whole, though his immediate concern is with the final two columns which capture two spheres of relation.<sup>16</sup> He notes that there is 'one [sphere] of the truth which can be grasped intellectually and the other of the good to which the will can attain – the former being the sphere of speculation, the other of action within time'.<sup>17</sup> This epistemological analogy with the

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 534-544. See also Arthur Eyffinger, 'Outlines of Hugo Grotius' Poetry', in *Grotius*, vol. 2, ed. John Dunn and Ian Harris (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 1997), 120-138.

<sup>16</sup> Besselink says, 'In itself the psychological analogy between the trinity and the human soul is not an original one; it was made already by Augustine. But unlike Augustine, the actual wording of the psychological analogy which Grotius draws, is that of the trinitarian dogma concerning the nature of the relationship between the persons of the Godhead: the intellect is said to be born (*nascitur*) from the mind, and in turn the will is said to proceed (*procedit*) from it'. 'Impious Hypothesis', 538.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 540.

relationship of the Son and the Spirit has the effect of establishing a fundamental link between the intellect and the will.

It is worth pausing just for a moment to understand this relationship in the divine/human analogy. First, note that both faculties maintain their own distinct and proper function. The intellect cannot “attain” the good just as the will cannot “grasp” the truth. Rather, an understanding of the intellect-will interplay involves recognizing the proper structure of their relationship without collapsing the distinct integrity of each faculty. Besselink describes this in Grotius as ‘an (unspontaneous) order proper to them, the will obeying the intellect, once the intellect has been set and directed by the will to grasp a particular good’.<sup>18</sup> This demonstrates that there is a proper *movement* from intellectual knowledge to volitional good, while at the same time the rightly-acting will can direct the intellect toward certain truths. This is why I have seized upon his term “interplay” to capture Grotius’ understanding of the relationship – it does not move in one direction only but rather in a kind of constantly fluid (yet properly ordered) interaction.<sup>19</sup>

To build upon this point notice, second, that Grotius is not positing a kind of efficient causal relationship whereby the intellect determines right knowledge and the will necessarily enacts the intellectual truth-claim in the form of right action. As Besselink notes, the relationship does not imply that ‘the will is always and in all respects under the sway of the intellect, as if all reality were an intellectual reality’.<sup>20</sup>

Looking to the Trinitarian parallel helps demonstrate the error of such a necessarily

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 544. ,

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Grotius says in *Eucharista I*, ‘Love grants us this beatitude, that through it our intellect—although it cannot grasp all the essences ... is unable to act by itself— become pure intellect, and enters into action, so that all acting be joined to the intellect’ (542). Besselink notes, ‘To conclude along such extremely intellectualist lines would contradict the kind of juxtaposition of intellect and will which (analogously to the relation between the Son and the Spirit) Grotius described in the paraphrase of the Gospel of John’ (542).

determined will: a wing-clipped account of the freedom and spontaneity of the Spirit as wholly and controllingly determined by the Son would subvert the lovingly free interplay of all three Persons in the God-head. Similarly, an intellectually restricted account of the will would subvert the integrity of its distinct faculty.

This interplay also has consequences for the determination of right action because the volitional pursuit of the good involves intellectual recognition of truth. What this means, in moral terms, is that ‘right action in reality, has, therefore, a foundation in the mind through the intellect’.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, ‘social action is thus not a purely mental affair’.<sup>22</sup> Both morally and epistemologically there is an interplay between identification of truth and right action which has particular consequences for ethics.

The term that captures this epistemological interplay in its political function is “judgment”. It is neither strictly the exercise of the will nor the determination of truth on the part of the intellect. Instead, Grotius aligns right judgment with reference to the character of right political action. Besselink notes that ‘Grotius stated, as we saw, that in order for a judgment to be right, the will needs to conform to the intellect and the intellect to the thing itself’.<sup>23</sup> In other words, there must be a twofold congruence whereby the intellect must align with the truth and the will must align with the intellect. This is, from an epistemological perspective, a properly integrated moral action. Politically speaking, it is right judgment.

Such judgment must not only be based on a proper understanding of the good, it also should be the aim of the exercise of the will (i.e., it must correspond to

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 544.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 548.

the intellect).<sup>24</sup> This is why, for Grotius, ‘judgment precedes proximately the act of exerting authority, for exerting authority belongs to the will’.<sup>25</sup> Just as right judgment is not simply an exercise of authority, so an integrated moral action is neither strictly an intellectual reality nor a volitional one. Rather right action maintains the juxtaposition of the intellect and the will ‘in the sense that each has its own essence and its own role to play in action; yet, precisely in action there is an interplay between the two’.<sup>26</sup> To properly understand that epistemological structure (and its distinct theological significance via the Trinitarian analogy) is to properly understand the function of political judgment.

Consider, now, the significance of these claims in light of this study of political contingency and temporality. Ramsey’s political theology similarly sustains a proper order to the intellect and the will in his understanding of politics as a kind of doing. On one hand, political ethics is not merely “doing” – an act of the will or an exercise of political authority. That is why he insists that ‘a political action is always an exercise of power and an exercise of purpose’.<sup>27</sup> Without purpose the political reality becomes a purely volitional one.

On the other hand, neither is it simply the intellectual determination of truth or the identification of principles of justice. That is why he does not believe that

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<sup>24</sup> This attempt to capture the political connection between the thing and the subject is also present in Grotius’ wider sense of right developed in book one of *De Iure Belli ac Pacis*. He notes, ‘A right, in this sense, attaches to the subject even though it is sometimes associated with a thing’. Grotius, ‘The Right of War and Peace’, 797. Notice also the similarity between the intellect/will distinction and the faculty/fitness distinction which follows in book one. Finally, notice that the twofold idea that right action must be properly attuned to the political good and simultaneously the aim of any exercise of political authority is mirrored in the ubiquitous tension in Ramsey’s work between insisting on the rigidity of principles of justice and the unassailability of the magistrate’s competency as decision maker.

<sup>25</sup> Besselink, ‘Impious Hypothesis’, 542. This passage is taken from *De Imperio*, V, I, 1, *Opera Theologica* III, 22 a 13-18.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 544. What sustains the notion of interplay here is that the intellect is directed by the will in pursuit of truth and the will is directed by the intellect in right action.

<sup>27</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 8. I highlighted this point in chapter five. He continues, ‘power without purpose and purpose without power are equally nonpolitical’.

‘choice among alternative military policies can itself be deduced from just war criteria’.<sup>28</sup> Instead, politics is a kind of doing whereby there is sustained active attention to the political good and the intellectual identification of that good (which precedes and attends to the pursuit of that good through social action). It is a kind of doing which integrates the properly ordered movement of right intellect and right action. In Grotian terms, it is judgment.

This connection between theological epistemology and political ethics underlies the work on covenant and repentance in this study. Ramsey’s theology of repentance is essentially an attempt to shield magistrates from bearing the moral weight of the indeterminacy of political endeavors while at the same time holding them accountable for the identification of some political acts as morally inexcusable (and the rejection of those acts in policy and practice). It is simultaneously a commentary on the limitations on human intellectual and volitional capacities – politics as the science of the possible – and a theology of moral responsibility – politics as constructive action under the judgment of God. “Moral anguish” as characteristic of a conscience limited, obligated and justified by norms of war serves essentially the same interpretive function.<sup>29</sup> His theological perspective is grounded

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Ramsey to Ronald J. Sider, December 15, 1981, Box 25, Ramsey Papers. Along these lines he recommends at the beginning of *Nine Modern Moralists*, ‘The reader of this volume should therefore pay attention, in his own processes of making judgment and arriving at a practical conclusion, to the *why* as well as the *what* of Christian social action: to the reason and grounds for certain criticisms and recommendations he may himself make for the good of society. *Nine Modern Moralists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 3. I take his comment that judgment covers both the *what* and the *why* to be similar to Grotius’ observations on the intellect and the will.

<sup>29</sup> For Ramsey, as for Grotius, attuning the intellect to the rightness of the thing in itself is only half of the political task. His principles of justice (identifying actions to be considered “no moment more”) and an emphasis on the distinctive features of the office of the magistrate (negotiating the tension between justification, obligation and limitation) was precisely an attempt to illuminate the complexity of, in Grotian terms, the fact that in order for a political action to be properly attentive to right the action ‘must have a twofold congruence: the one of the will with the intellect and the other of the intellect with the things in itself’. Besselink, ‘Impious Hypothesis’, 542.

in commitments to certain and distinct epistemological limitations to political agency.

At the same time those limitations enable (and justify) acts of political judgment. His theology of covenant informs an account of the *esse/bene esse* of politics that, in turn, assigns to the church the task of identifying and delimiting principles of justice. The church refrains from the determination of particular policy decisions so as not to usurp the special responsibility of the magistrate.<sup>30</sup> This divide reflects the Grotian insistence that while political action ‘has a foundation through the intellect in the mind’, it is not ‘a purely mental affair’.<sup>31</sup> It is the distinction between the determination of the good and an integrated act of judgment which produces social action in accordance with that good.

The latent epistemology behind these concepts becomes clear when considering that Grotius describes the intellect much like Ramsey describes the function of the church in relation to political authority. Grotius says, ‘But the intellect works on the will like the orators in a free republic through persuasion and does not always obtain to the requested obedience because of the liberty which is agnate and proper to the will’.<sup>32</sup> He continues, saying, ‘hence the clearer the knowledge, the severer the punishment if the will not be obedient’.<sup>33</sup> Ramsey’s church functions like those orators in a free republic. He sees the possibility of criticism of magistrates – i.e., holding them accountable for moral norms – to be

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<sup>30</sup> In chapter six I noted his tendency to use a concept of prudence to capture this divide. ‘Without prudence there would be no morality at all put forth into actual practice and decision-making’. Paul Ramsey to Byron Johnson, February 17, 1961, Box 12, Ramsey Papers. Or, ‘Prudence, or practical wisdom in actual exercise, is always in the service of prior insight, conviction, or principle. Its function is the application in living action of something prior which governs our choices’. Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Besselink, ‘Impious Hypothesis’, 542.

<sup>32</sup> Grotius, *De fide et operibus*, *Opera Theologica* III, 521 1 8-42. Cited in Besselink, ‘Impious Hypothesis’, 544.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

reliant on prior determinations of justice. Thus, the church orients its ecumenical energies around the identification and clarification of moral principles while at the same time respecting the liberty which is “agnate and proper” to political authority.

### **Judgment, Conscience and Theological Epistemology**

I began this study by noting that treating Ramsey as a political theologian requires close attention to many of the implicit theological assumptions driving his casuistry. What becomes clear upon this investigation of those assumptions (and in light of this analogy with Grotius) is that he also leaves implicit the significance of a theological epistemology for his perspective on politics. If he makes it difficult for his readers to nail down the theological assumptions underlying his politics, he offers them even less by way of a theological epistemology. This observation serves at once to appreciate the value of the interpretive gains of this study in identifying Ramsey’s theological contributions, while at the same time identifying an additional layer of needed investigation into his thinking.

It must be sufficient to note at this stage that the closest Ramsey comes to articulating some of his latent theological epistemology is in an unpublished paper on conscience from a Duodecim theological society conference in May 1963. In that paper, titled ‘Christian Freedom and the Ethical Reality of Conscience’, he draws heavily upon conceptual work by Paul Tillich to argue that conscience is wrongly being ‘emptied of concrete behavioral meaning and power’.<sup>34</sup> Instead, it is being

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<sup>34</sup> Ramsey, ‘Christian Freedom’, 2. His distaste for an interpretation of conscience strictly as a burden of guilt is quite similar to his concerns about repentance detailed in the first section of this thesis. See also Ramsey’s comments on similar epistemology in ‘The Status and Advancement of Theological Scholarship in America’, *The Christian Scholar* 47, no. 1 (1964), 7-23.

used as ‘the seat and source of guilt which paralyzes the nerve of ethical action’.<sup>35</sup>

Because he speaks of conscience in a way that is remarkably similar to the role Grotius’ assigns to judgment in his political theology, it is worth concluding by taking note of a few of his argumentative moves in this paper.

Ramsey expresses two concerns about conscience via concepts lifted from Tillich’s *Systematic Theology*.<sup>36</sup> First, the “ethical reality of conscience” may be overwhelmed by a doctrine of autonomy. By this he means that it has ‘identified man’s freedom to decide with the freedom of choice, and connected the knowledge of good and evil with the internally directed exercise of the will’.<sup>37</sup> I take this to be essentially the same as Grotius’ rejection of an epistemology which collapses the function of the intellect into the dominant function of the will. The autonomous conscience lacks the proper accountability for adhering to standards of goodness or intellectual determinations of truth. It simply acts.

Second, the “ethical reality of conscience” may be overwhelmed by a doctrine of heteronomy. By this he means that it has ‘identified the knowledge of good and evil with an imposed order of stability, and connected man’s freedom to decide with assent and adherence to externally directed rules and regularities’.<sup>38</sup> I take heteronomy to be essentially similar to Grotius’ dismissal of an epistemology which collapses the function of the will into the dominant function of the intellect. A heteronomous view of conscience reduces volition to a simple identification of the moral or intellectual reality. It simply knows. In this way, both autonomy and

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<sup>35</sup> Ramsey, ‘Christian Freedom’, 2. The comments are clearly shaped by the line of thought driving his essay on guilt and Dostoevsky in *Nine Modern Moralists*. I discuss this essay on two occasions in the first section of this study.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1951).

<sup>37</sup> Ramsey, ‘Christian Freedom’, 6.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



heteronomy have ‘all but rendered the conscience ethically expendable’.<sup>39</sup> He refers to both misconceptions as enforcing a ‘cleavage between the ethical claim and the ethical act’.<sup>40</sup>

The answer to these views is what he calls a ‘theonomous’ account of conscience – an understanding of human nature in terms of divine nature.<sup>41</sup> A theonomous epistemology argues that ‘the knowledge of good and evil is itself the very environment of man’s humanity’.<sup>42</sup> This ‘would mean that the knowledge of good and evil is neither the reward of a properly conducted search for the good nor the result of a careful assessment of the powers of man’ (i.e., a theonomous approach would ensure that intellect and will sustain their distinct and respective faculties).<sup>43</sup> This is nearly identical to Grotius’ use of the Trinitarian/psychological analogy to assert that judgment is neither the exercise of the will nor the determination of the intellect but the interplay between the two.

Ramsey then provides an account of conscience based on this proper view of God and humanity. He says, ‘conscience is the act – both of knowing and of doing – which expresses and exposes the connection between the knowledge of good and

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Ramsey says later, ‘In the one case, conscience is surrendered to conformity, in the other to non-conformity; in the first instance to heteronomy, in the second to autonomy. But in either case, the conscience is dismembered from its authenticating context and becomes the instrument of ethical irresponsibility’ (12).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>41</sup> He defines ‘theonomous’ in *Nine Modern Moralists*, saying, ‘God has made us for himself and not for mere inclusion within society. Man is a *theonomous* animal: this means that only God has final governance over him. Man is a *religious* animal: this means that he is built for worship and for fellowship with God, and not for the superiority of earthly goals over his life’. *Nine Modern Moralists*, 23-24. See also Scott Davis, “‘Et Quod Vis Fac’: Paul Ramsey and Augustinian Ethics”, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 19, no. 2 (1991): 40.

<sup>42</sup> Ramsey, ‘Christian Freedom’, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. ‘Such ways of thinking about ethics cannot give reality to man’s freedom to decide for himself what is good and what is evil’ (6). Ramsey says elsewhere, ‘The test is how far it is from what a man understands to what he does and back again; how great a distance or how close the proximity between his understanding and his actions. ... All one’s action should be Christianly understood, else it is not action that engages the Christian *as such*; while all one’s understanding should be actionable, else it is not the thinking that engages the Christian *as such*’. ‘Status and Advancement’, 12.

evil as the environment of humanization and the obedient response to this environment'.<sup>44</sup> This is an early epistemological statement of what it means for politics to be a kind of doing. The "ethical reality of conscience" is 'the ethical act' – both of knowing and of doing.<sup>45</sup> It is the 'creative link between the knowledge of good and evil and the freedom of decision in that knowledge'.<sup>46</sup> In political terms this is the structure of movement toward the good.

What shields Ramsey from making the connection between these epistemological observations on conscience and the theo-political significance of judgment in political ethics has to do with his concern to uphold the transcendence of the judgment of God. He is concerned about 'conspicuous parallelism between conscience and the wrath of God' in Romans chapter nine, saying, 'in juxtaposing wrath and conscience, the sensitivity of the Hebrew response "from the heart" to the dynamics and purposefulness of the Divine order and governance of the world transforms the context of conscience and thus also the meaning of conscience itself'.<sup>47</sup> The juxtaposition of conscience and wrath means that its function is not a measurement of 'the humanization of man' by 'the pain of conscience'.<sup>48</sup> Rather, 'an order is acknowledged, each element of which has its instrumental function and significance within the limits which concretely define the redemptive obedience of

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<sup>44</sup> Ramsey, 'Christian Freedom', 7.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 8. 'Obviously the kind of ethical literalism which aims at one-to-one correlation between a specific word of Jesus and a specific action misses the point of Jesus' teaching. Decision-making as the Christian understands it goes on in quite another way. For the Christian, the environment of decision not the rules of decision gives to behavior its ethical significance. If God is at work in this world, doing what it takes to make and to keep human life human, no specific action can be said to express or fulfill an ethical principle in a literal way. Telling the truth is not identical with optimum verbal veracity. It is a matter of saying the 'right' word. The 'right' word, however, is a sign that human relations are going on in an environment of trust. The "grain of mustard seed" is a sign that an environment of trust has been established and is being sustained by the activity of God' (4).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

the creature to God the creator and redeemer'.<sup>49</sup> To translate, he argues that an account of conscience as a guilt-inducing faculty must be replaced with one that is attentive to the proper order of created human relations.<sup>50</sup> Because he does not want the account of conscience to collapse into a notion of guilt, he is eager to separate it from notions of judgment.

Of course, Ramsey is not speaking of provisional political judgments but eternal divine judgment. Thus, he says, 'conscience cannot be understood as an internal human faculty of judgment which functions to condemn. It is not conscience but the Lord who judges'.<sup>51</sup> Dividing conscience and judgment serves the immediate function in his paper of removing guilt as the principal aim of conscience. But it simultaneously obscures the connection between conscience as the interplay of knowledge and freedom and judgment as the political interplay of intellect and will.

This also obscures the theological significance of his epistemological account of conscience for his political ethics. As I mentioned earlier, the ambiguity of politics is itself a witness to the kingdom of God because it makes possible faithfulness to that kingdom. In an essentially similar manner, conscience witnesses to Jesus Christ by 'the extent to which this free choice is a live and decisive option in relation to Jesus Christ'.<sup>52</sup> What he calls the 'the witnessing function of conscience' reveals the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. As with deferred repentance, that order is not absent in moral engagements. He says 'this does not mean that ethical behavior has been carried beyond the boundaries of condemnation and justification, remorse and condemnation, guilt and righteousness. It means that conscience has been deprived of its intrinsic power to accuse or to excuse— whether the conscience of my neighbor or my own' (13).

<sup>50</sup> Ramsey writes here that 'It is incumbent upon ethics to offer a description of the nature and function of conscience in such a way as to explain the intrinsic conjunction in the ethical act, on the one hand of freedom and obedience, and on the other of free obedience with the knowledge of good and evil'. Ibid., 7. Attention to the order of created human relations involves a balance between knowledge of good and evil (intellect) and human freedom (will).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 11.

divine-human relation that characterizes his theonomous view of human agency.<sup>53</sup>

That same impulse drives his appreciation for the theological significance of political judgment.

## Conclusion

I mentioned previously that I aimed to appreciate the interpretive theological gains of this study by probing the similarities between Ramsey and Grotius. Not only does Grotius' theological epistemology shed light onto the significance of the idea that politics is a kind of doing, it also illuminates several of Ramsey's own latent epistemological assumptions. If he seeks a theonomous epistemology – one that relates human nature to divine nature – he can hardly find a better example for his own moral and political claims than Grotius' use of the Trinitarian analogy to illuminate the function of judgment as the interplay of the intellect and the will. While this account of conscience may be as close as we can get to an explicit recognition of the epistemological issues underlying his theological perspective on politics, it is also quite a helpful starting point for investigation of those underlying foundations.

Ramsey saw clearly that Grotius inherited the classical tradition of just war thinking and tried to position his own work within that intellectual heritage. He notes in a letter late in his career that 'Grotius is ... continuing the [just war] doctrine as it always was. ... The growth of nation-states had multiplied the problem of attaining

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. The 'ethical usefulness' of this account of conscience 'is recognized not as intrinsic to itself but as intrinsic to the exposure by Jesus Christ of the secrets of men' (11). He says elsewhere, 'So much do theological reflection and action coinhere, that the more we know of God's Word in Christ the more we comprehend His world and the forms of action appropriate in it; and the more we comprehendingly participate in this world's affairs the more surely we know, and know that we know, Him whom we believe. In the life of coinhering love that holds reflection and action inseverably together, it matters not much with which side you begin'. Ramsey, 'Status and Advancement', 12.

justice in war; it had not changed its essential character as a matter of political decision'.<sup>54</sup> Ramsey's understanding of politics as a kind of doing explains and upholds the theological significance of political decision-making. The just war theory, for both thinkers, is about political acts of judgment.

Ramsey's theological interpretation of politics illuminates contingency and temporality as features of created existence making possible faithful creaturely response. Politics as a kind of doing describes these structures of interaction and decision which come to fruition in the form of political judgment. What I have tried to demonstrate is the significance of his theology of repentance and covenant for his understanding of these fundamental features of political morality.

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<sup>54</sup> Paul Ramsey to Jean MacLachlan, April 5, 1963, Box 29, Ramsey Papers.

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